Death and Transformation in Romantic Song
Cycles
Journeys in Interpretation

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Statement of Originality
This work has not previously been submitted for a degree or diploma in any university. To the best of my knowledge and belief, the thesis contains no material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the thesis itself.

The referencing and citing system used in this dissertation follows the procedures as per the Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association (APA) Fifth Edition.

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Date.........................................................................................
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June 2014 - ABSTRACT

The Romantic period gave rise to the genre of the song cycle – a collection of songs grouped by poetic theme or narrative arc - through which composers align their musical inspiration with the works of poets and delve into the human experience. Profound themes, such as death and transformation, appear often in song cycle works as the genre provides a vehicle within which they are carefully examined and expanded upon. The form of the song cycle gives performers an opportunity to explore a long narrative, a particular set of emotions, a philosophical perspective, or a defining set of circumstances in more depth than is possible in individual songs. The question of how a performer approaches this absorbing process, lives and grows within the musical and poetic world each cycle offers, and prepares to perform the resulting interpretation is not often documented, and is the focus of this research.

I have chosen three case study programs of Romantic song cycles through which to examine my process as a singer preparing and performing works that focus on the themes of death and transformation – Schubert’s Winterreise; Mahler’s Kindertotenlieder and Mussorgsky’s Songs and Dances of Death; Butterworth’s Bredon Hill and A Shropshire Lad and Vaughan-Williams’ Songs of Travel. I draw on a number of methodologies to do justice to the dynamic and evolving nature of the art of performance. I employ my own artistic method in the practical application of this research and draw on fields such as relational-cultural theory and autoethnography in the written exegesis to support my performances. The process, performances, and exegesis not only help me to discover the intrinsic value of my own motivations and inspirations but also provide the performance and research community with an in-depth and honest exploration of the genesis of interpretation from my unique perspective, thus encouraging others to take similar journeys to explore their own internal worlds as they relate to their repertoire.
INTRODUCTION

*Writing is a long process of introspection; it is a voyage towards the darkest caverns of consciousness, a long, slow meditation.*

Isabel Allende “Paula” (1995, p.9)

In my experience, one of classical art song’s greatest gifts is its ability to bring together composer and poet in a final product that enhances our understanding of what it is to be human, and to illuminate parts of life about which it is difficult (if not sometimes impossible) to talk. Nowhere is this more apparent to me than in the song cycles of the Romantic period. In the case of death and other transformative human experiences, the song cycle genre contains a number of works through which audiences and performers might explore and, in some small way, come to terms with our own mortality, the loss of our loved ones, and the changing relationship we have with the nature of our existence. Song cycles such as those selected for this study offer us all a meaningful and, often times, cathartic way in which to confront some of the deeper truths of our humanity. Literary and musical images of death and transformation form a significant thread in the fabric of these western art song works. These works, focusing on themes of death and processes of change, require the performer to lead an audience on a complex and challenging journey through the evolution or deterioration of a character, narrator, or set of circumstances. The transformational experiences contained in our contact with and contemplation of death are communicated in a variety of ways by the composers and poets of these song cycles. The performer's challenge is to rise to the fundamental importance of these themes and the gravitas of the music to allow the audience a transformational experience of their own.

This topic might appear to be unusual and (to some) even distasteful. However, it is my belief that the exploration of these two fundamental themes and the associated works of art that this study considers is in fact a great gift to me as an artist seeking, as I do, to create meaningful and lasting connections with my collaborators and audiences. Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, herself a pioneering researcher on death and dying, observes: “For those who seek to understand it, death is a highly creative force. The highest spiritual values of life can originate from the thought and study of death.” (1975, p.1) In discussing her own work, she notes that it is not “morbid and depressing but can be one of the most gratifying
experiences possible, and I feel now that I have lived life more fully in the last few years than some people do in a whole lifetime” (1975, p. xxii). Writing this document as I approach the end of this research journey I can only wholeheartedly agree.

As a performer (and throughout my life), I find myself drawn to works like these as I pursue a life (both professional and private) that is filled with authenticity, genuine human connection, depth of self-exploration, meaningful engagement for the intellect, and true nourishment for the soul. This research project provides the opportunity for me to examine my motivations and inspirations as I prepare and perform each of the cycles above, and to provide others with an example of the inner world of one performer's journey through these themes and works, and its outer manifestation in performance. This research is significant in its exploration of the interpretive processes a singer goes through in preparing major song cycle works around these challenging and sometimes harrowing themes that have not often been explored from the performer’s perspective. While much literature exists to assist and inspire singers as they make their technical preparations for performance, the actual journey of interpretation and communication is often left to the singer to intuit on their own.

A recitalist's journey has unique challenges that do not apply to operatic or oratorio singers who have the mediation of conductors, directors, and even other cast members to rely on when preparing for their performances. The key relationship in recital singing is that which exists between singer and pianist, as the two musicians collaborate toward a unified vision of the musical work. The nature of such collaborations and the interpretations that grow from them have rarely if ever been documented in detail and so this research, that provides a window into one singer's navigation of that journey, offers an insight into that collaborative and interpretive journey. It can be of use to a number of performers in this field who are building interpretations of their own, teachers and coaches who are guiding performers’ interpretive explorations, and of interest to others who are seeking to uncover new perspectives on creative processes from a practitioner’s point of view. This project follows my preparation and presentation of three major recital programmes, using Schubert’s Winterreise, Mahler’s Kindertotenlieder and
Mussorgsky’s *Songs and Dances of Death*, and Butterworth’s *Bredon Hill* and *A Shropshire Lad* and Vaughan-Williams’ *Songs of Travel*. As each recital program is being prepared and presented, my processes are observed and the journey of building and sharing a unique interpretation are chronicled. I explore the challenges of negotiating an authentic artistic and emotional relationship with these works, bringing them to life through the filter of that relationship, and communicating them effectively to an audience. The insights gained throughout the process inform both the written exegesis and the artistic process. Research into these composers and works discovers how these particular musical journeys through death and transformation were inspired, informed, and created. The significance of these works, both at the time of composition and to audiences and performers since, and major interpretations in their recording and performance history, inform my observations on both the life of the cycles and the re-creations I am undertaking. The final performances (included with this thesis on DVD recordings) are not intended as an end in themselves. Rather, they are part of the ongoing process of building and observing an interpretation, and observations on all of the works will necessarily have some overlap into work on others. No musical experience exists in a vacuum, and these case study works have been chosen to complement each other and to contribute to an overarching narrative about interpretation of particular themes through the vehicle of the song cycle. Similarities and variations among the performances will shed light on various aspects of the interpretive process and allow as full a picture as possible to come forward of the preparation and delivery of these kinds of works. This project aims to shine a light on a process that is little discussed among singers or in the broader academic discourse and is deserving of more research focus among both practitioners and academics.

**Apologia**

The nature of doctoral research (particularly that undertaken during a Doctor of Musical Arts) means that limitations abound and boundaries must be drawn somewhere. It was inevitable that this project would not be able to encompass all the repertoire I would have liked to have included, and doubtless the reader will have much music and poetry in mind that might have been usefully explored in this journey. While I have explained above the particular appeal of song cycles, rather than individual songs, as material for both my performances and this
exegesis, I acknowledge that some masterworks of the art song genre that deal with the themes of death and transformation have necessarily been excluded by this approach. In addition, there may be other cycles from the Romantic period (and, of course, many cycles beyond that time) that some might consider more appropriate or interesting in this context. I can only say that these are the cycles that drew me, that I wanted to sing, and whose poetry I was keen to explore. My main regret was that I lacked the time or resource to include a programme of French song cycles. That culture has a unique and compelling relationship with the often ecstatic and sensuous nature of death and transformation, and the music and poetry of its major song composers and poets reflect this beautifully. This research might spur others on to explore the repertoire I was not able to reach in their own unique ways, thus creating an expanding pool of performer-driven research that validates our internal journeys with our repertoire, examines the myriad sources of our inspirations, and reaches out to other performers and audiences to show that our humanity connects us all to each other and that these works remain relevant in illuminating and reflecting upon important issues in our modern lives.

This research is highly subjective. My interactions with other performers, with supervisors, and with friends are documented here from my own perspective and may vary from the ways in which my relationships and performances were experienced by these others. Much of my own life experience is explored as I search throughout my life for the events that relate to the themes under discussion and which inform my reactions to the music and poetry that it is my privilege to perform. These events are related as I remember experiencing them, often times (as with my struggles with depression) recreated from memories that are patchy due to trauma or illness. I am not seeking to use these experiences to dictate how human lives are struck by death and transformation, or impacted upon by musical preparation and performance activities. Rather, they represent how my life has been touched by these themes, where my experiences cross over with those explored in these cycles, and how the times of preparation and performance have felt to me. These truths are my own and not intended to be taken as universal. My intention is that my writing might act as an example of how others can discover their own truths in relation to the music that speaks to them.
Similarly, the places that I found inspiration (in resources which are discussed below) while preparing these cycles will inevitably differ from those that will provide inspiration to others. The literature and resources I explored during these years are not meant to indicate an exhaustive list of what may or may not be useful to a performer. In fact, just as I had to draw a line in my selection of repertoire, I have had to focus my attention on those resources I felt had the most to offer the reader and have many times wished that I could have included more literature, recordings, or performances from a variety of artists in my chronicling of this incredibly rich and fulfilling time of exploration. There were many resources in my sphere of reference that were competing for space in these pages and still more of which I remain unaware and am eager to discover in future preparatory journeys.

Pianist Keith Jarret’s insight into where creative inspiration comes from speaks volumes to the process explored in this research:

“How important are other things than music in influencing the way you think?”
“More important than music.”
“Like writing, philosophy…”
“More important than music.”
“Really?”
“Yes. One of the biggest fallacies, I think, in art circles and in music circles maybe, when people talk about it, is that music comes from music. It’s like saying babies come from babies – that’s not true, it isn’t what happens. Music is the result of a process the musician’s going through, especially if he’s creating it on the spot.” (Keith Jarrett being interviewed in Dibb, M. & Nissem, D., 2005)

**Method**

The creative and flexible nature of both the artistic practice and the written research in this project do not exactly align with any one method of data collection or analysis. In fact, the very phrase “data collection” with regard to this work seems at best an ill fit, at worst an insult to the creative process by trying to make it match a scientific one. While there are a number of qualitative methods from the social sciences which have been useful at times, this project is driven by, and dedicated to, creative self-expression and exploration, frank engagement with emotional themes and works, and a philosophy of openness and disclosure about discoveries of what inspires the musical process. As such, any methodologies used have been fluid and emergent – often blending throughout the research journey and being drawn on or disregarded as the creative process dictates. I could say that this project takes a mixed method approach, but something about that term
(mixed method) still feels too inflexible. I much prefer Judith Halberstam’s term (cited by Jodie Taylor, 2012, p.4) “scavenger methodology” – it speaks to me of something a little removed from traditional academia (as performers often feel), that takes or leaves pieces of academic discipline as they seem to fit or jar with the creative work underway and that “necessitates interdisciplinarity in its betrayal of disciplinary conventions and boundaries, both methodological and theoretical.” (Taylor, 2012, p. 4). That interdisciplinarity has particularly come to the fore in the use of Relational Cultural Theory, a methodology that finds its home in feminist psychology. This theory’s philosophy of connection through growth fostering relationships seems to me to be well matched to the goal of the creative process. We create in order to connect; to be seen, heard, read, or in some way understood. Even if we are creating for ourselves and never intend to display the outcome of our creative process, we are communicating within and reaching out to our future selves who may revisit the writing, painting, or music that results from our creativity.

One aspect of this research that none of the available qualitative social science methodologies can encompass, is the method that exists within the act of musical practice itself. The practice of making music is not without its own discipline and procedures, but these vary from musician to musician and are essentially unique to the practitioner in their combination and weighting of variables within the studio, and in performance. Much of this research will be undertaken musically and, as much as I will attempt to describe my methods here, is the epitome of emergent process – the singer deals with the voice, body, and state of health and mind that they have on any given day. After outlining my methods of artistic practice below, I give an overview of the selection of qualitative methodologies that served this research. Minichiello and Kottler, in Qualitative journeys: Student and mentor experiences with research (2010), discuss the ways in which various methods can “capture essences (phenomenology), plotlines (narrative analysis), and codes (grounded theory).” (p. 279). Creative endeavour demands all this and more as it resists classification, and a “scavenger methodology” seems the best way to honour that.

Methods of Artistic Practice
My methods of artistic practice fall into three main categories: my own
preparation alone in the studio, preparation in the studio with a teacher or pianist, and performance activity. Each of these environments engages a variety of different skills as I work with individual focus, collaboration or learning focus, and broad focus on both collaboration and audience communication. These categories overlap somewhat; the close focus on detail during my own preparation alone is carried over into lessons and collaborative work with my pianist, the collaborative relationship between singer and pianist is still strengthening and evolving during performance, and the communicative work that belongs to performance for an audience is being developed and considered during both earlier phases of preparation.

Preparation alone in the studio for me is very detailed and focussed on my instrument, my body, and close reading of the musical score. This work is the time to lay foundational working habits for my approach to each cycle and to explore the different technical aspects of my delivery. While I can begin to formulate an emotional response to the music and make some initial decisions about the ways in which I want to communicate the poetry, it is not possible to completely engage in those aspects of the work until I am in the studio with a pianist collaborator. I use my time alone to become completely at ease with all aspects of the vocal line and the text, and to familiarise myself with the work as a whole before other contributors (such as teacher and pianist) bring their own ideas to the process.

Preparation in the studio with other contributors differs from the intensely personal focus available to me in the studio alone. Work with a teacher or a pianist is a dynamic, iterative process that involves presenting my position so far (my ideas, communicative approach, and technical ability) and then making adjustments as feedback is received in the form of tuition or new interpretations of musical ideas. Both of these working processes are hugely dependant on the relationship between participants and are always evolving as two creative people come together, with all their attendant feelings about the work and each other, and their own personalities and psychologies. The success or failure of these working relationships can often dictate the success or failure of the creative enterprise and I find it vital in my work to align myself with people who are able to bring out the best in what I have to offer and are able to match me in my commitment to the working relationship.
Performance activity is so varied that there is no amount of description that will cover every possible context. There are some constants throughout the spectrum of performance activity, but many variables are subject to alteration, and these are often unable to be predicted as they appear at the moment of performance. In the scope of recital singing (the type of performance that is related to presentations of the song cycles at the centre of this project), the most important constant is the collaboration between singer and pianist. Even this is subject to change, as human relationships are not static and do not observe permanent fixed states. However, ideally, a strong working relationship will have been built up during the progression toward performance, and a long-standing relationship between pianist and singer can come to be something on which both participants can rely. Other variables in recital performance differ regularly. Audiences may be large or small, with a varying number of audience members having previous experience of the repertoire, or being familiar with the language in which the cycle is sung. Recital venues range from theatres, to concert halls, churches, art galleries, salons, and outdoor spaces (to name a few). Each performance experience will be unique, as each performer will be uniquely prepared, anxious, confident, tired, or excited – the best any singer can do to moderate the experience is be open and ready to respond to whatever conditions are present on the day.

**Relational-Cultural Theory**

Relational-Cultural Theory (RCT) arose after the work of Jean Baker Miller documented (in 1976) “the ways in which women’s reality was not being represented in traditional psychological theories” (Jordan, 2008, p. 1). Two years later, a group of women including Baker Miller, Judith Jordan, Irene Stiver, and Janet Surrey worked together to create RCT. Although created in psychology, this theory and the philosophy behind it seem to me to fit beautifully with the work that those of us in the creative industries engage in, particularly those of us in performing arts. The “five good things” (Jordan, 2008, p.2) that growth fostering relationships (which are at the core of RCT) create can reflect those things that need to exist among performers who share the stage and between performers and audience members in order for the creative output to be as effective as possible. Below are those “five good things” and their connection to the creative processes of recital singing, which are central to this research.
1. *A sense of zest*

The energy shared between collaborators onstage (i.e. singer and pianist) and between performers and audience needs to be vital and alive if it is to maintain the focus of all involved. Sluggish energy (or complete lack of energy) will almost certainly result in loss of focus from performers and interest from audience members.

2. *Clarity about oneself, the other, and the relationship*

This is particularly important between singer and pianist. In art song repertoire written for voice and piano, leadership passes from one collaborator to the other as musical material is shared between them and important details of text or emotion are highlighted. Collaborative partners need to have a heightened sense of awareness about one another to not only allow this natural ebb and flow to occur, but also to be flexible enough to adapt to the many variables that come into play in a live performance. Additionally, the singer is entrusting the pianist with their entire being, body and soul. Physically, our bodies are our instruments and our collaborative partners need to be tuned in to our physical processes on a deep level if they are going to be able to move in tandem with us throughout the musical experience. On a psychological level, the singer is often baring deeply personal aspects of themselves onstage, particularly in works such as those under discussion in this research. This can be difficult to achieve if collaborative partners are insecure about themselves, the other and the relationship.

3. *A sense of personal worth*

Any act of performance art requires an enormous leap of faith in oneself on the part of the performer. In recital, singer and pianist are called to trust one another with unfaltering self-assurance and must allow their partner to trust them in return, so that both performers can approach the stage safe in the knowledge that this trust will not be betrayed by harsh judgements or blocked lines of communication. A collaborative relationship that corrodes the self-worth of either partner runs the risk of faltering when one or other performer lacks the confidence to open themselves completely to the
creative process. The performer and audience relationship must also foster this sense of personal worth. It is hardly worth an audience’s time to be present in a performance where they feel they are not valued. Likewise, the courage of the performers to bare themselves to one another and to the audience, particularly in extremely emotional repertoire, should not be underestimated by those receiving the work.

4. *The capacity to be creative and productive*

The importance of this variable between collaborators hardly needs to be explained. However, it may also be important to the connection between audience and performers. An audience can be welcomed into a performance as a contributing body, one that can alter the mood of a performance considerably. An audience might also gain more from the experience by being prepared to give the performers permission to reproduce the repertoire as they see fit and to inhabit the musical and textual world fully as they explore their own connection with the work.

5. *The desire for more connection*

Again, this requires very little, if any, explanation. It would be a rare performer who did not wish for audiences that might attend their future performances.

As mentioned above, much of this work takes place within the context of the relationships between myself and the people with whom I am working on these song cycles. Relational-Cultural Theory “posits that growth fostering relationships are central human necessities” (Reicherzer and Comstock, 2010, p.196) and views relationship as a “vibrant, central, and multi-dimensional feature of development.” (West, 2005, p.94). The connections built, and eventually performed, during any musical process could be important to the outcome of the creative endeavour. I believe these relationships can act as a catalyst for the music to truly connect to audiences (and to the performers themselves) and in many ways could be part of the filter through which both parties (performers and audiences) experience the musical work and its attendant message. In terms of the process of musical preparation, my experience leads me to believe that relationship is an important variable in the successful development of a performer...
and their interpretation of the musical work in question. Although closely interwoven with feminist theory, I have primarily chosen to consider relational-cultural theory because of its core ideas (as stated by Jordan, 2008) “that women (although increasingly we think, all people) grow through and toward connection” and that “we grow by building growth fostering relationships and community. We grow through and toward relationships.” (p.2).

**Autoethnography**

My research is observational of a process, and autoethnography seems the best way in which to represent that. My resolve to write this exegesis from a highly personal and subjective perspective is validated by the wealth of autoethnographic writings that have been published in recent years including Anderson, L. (2006), Bartleet, B. L., & Ellis, C. (Eds.) (2009), Denzin, N. (2006), Ellis, C. (2007), Ellis, C. & Bochner, A.P. (2006), Ellis, C., & Bochner, A. P. (Eds.) (1996), Knowles, J. G. & Cole, A. L. (Eds.) (2008), Maple, M., & Edwards, H. (2010), Neumann, M. (1996), Reicherzer, S. & Comstock, D. L. (2010), Richardson, L. (1996), Scott-Hoy, K. & Ellis, C. (2008). These writings have been in relation to various fields including music. My goal is echoed in the thoughts of noted autoethnographer, Carolyn Ellis; “I want to record my research in a way readers can know and feel the complexities of the concrete moments of lived experience in their bodies” (Ellis 2004, as quoted in Scott-Hoy, 2008, p.4). The autoethnographic component takes the form of a personal narrative, built up from notes and observations made throughout the research process as I make my way through each of these works and from reflections on the life experiences I have had that relate to the themes under discussion. These autoethnographic insights are drawn from my artistic practice and review of literature and audio-visual resources. Insights from pianist collaborators and supervisors also contribute to my own understanding and processing of these works.

Though autoethnographic approaches have been shown to reveal much about the processes of musicians working across a variety of genres and styles (Bartleet, & Ellis, 2009), the process of autoethnography has a particular resonance with the art and discipline of recital singing. A recitalist is much like an autoethnographer of vocal music. While some works describe, or are narrated by, a particular character, art song repertoire generally relies more heavily on the singer’s ability to deliver
the narrative through the filter of the self than other genres of classical vocal music. In the recital setting the singer must become vulnerable by giving of themselves to an audience while still creating a world at a certain distance from themselves so as not to disturb the technical and creative process underway. The recitalist’s art could be described as the introspective twin to that of the extroverted operatic singer. Ruth Behar’s writing on the autoethnographic process could equally be applied to the art of the recitalist, when she notes that “... it does require a keen understanding of what aspects of the self are the most important filters through which one perceives the world and, more particularly, the topic being studied” (Behar, 1996, p.13).

The lack of a “fourth wall” (that invisible barrier through which the audience observe the dramatic process, unacknowledged by the performers onstage) in recital performance adds to the vulnerability of the performer and can make the audience/performer relationship critical to the success of any recital work. The original concept of the fourth wall is explained by Röttger (2010) in relation to the connection between painter and beholder.

The same dramatic concept can be found in Diderot’s definition of the relation between the viewer and the stage, for which he invented the concept of the ‘Fourth Wall’ that has since gained wide acceptance: ‘whether you are writing or whether you’re acting, think no more of the spectator than if he did not exist. Imagine at the edge of the stage a large wall which separates you from the orchestra; act as if the curtain never rose.’ (pp.379–380)

The performer is required to invite the audience within, to carry them on the journey as active participants, rather than allow them to sit back and passively observe. This aspect is underlined by Lady Evelyn Barbirolli’s observations of Kathleen Ferrier’s performances whose connection to her audiences was widely noted.

She had great warmth, I mean in herself, and a most outgoing sort of warmth and kindness, and I think in a curious way that came through her singing so that when she was singing to an audience… she sort of embraced them in the music that she was singing and so that they felt the warmth and the love and everything that she gave out all the time, which she did with such unstinting generosity. (Jackson, 2004)

In an effort to fully express what might be behind my interpretive inspirations for each work, I have embraced a philosophy of open disclosure about my life experiences that relate to the cycles under discussion.
Other Methodological Approaches
Three other methodological approaches have informed the creation and execution of this research but are either used less than the previously mentioned methodologies, or have been set aside once their useful purpose has concluded.

1. Case Study methodology helped to form the structure of this project. This research project is built around three recital programmes, which act as case studies of particular repertoire and catalysts for the exploratory process undertaken. Robson (2002) quotes Robert Yin’s (1981; 1994) definition of case study as “a strategy for doing research which involves an empirical investigation of a particular contemporary phenomenon within its real life context using multiple sources of evidence.” (p. 178). This definition goes a long way to explaining the relationship that this methodology has to the project at hand. The process of preparing these song-cycles guided the investigation as I explored my own real life context of preparing these interpretations, informed by lived experience, targeted literature, and related audio-visual resources as my multiple sources of evidence. The features of case study research as outlined by Stake (1978) also embody my hopes for the process and outcomes of this research:

   … descriptions that are complex, holistic and involving a myriad of not highly isolated variables; data that are likely to be gathered at least partly by personalistic observation; and a writing style that is informal, perhaps narrative, possibly with verbatim quotation, illustration, and even allusion and metaphor. (p. 7).

2. Narrative Inquiry appears through the use of a narrative voice which has already been mentioned above in the section on autoethnography. Narrative inquiry places its analytic focus on the plot – “the way narrators configure their stories and the meanings they attribute to the events within.”(Maple and Edwards, 2010, p. 35). In working with the autoethnographic material generated throughout my research process, a narrative arc appears due to the chronological nature of the case study performances. Personal narratives feature as the sections in which I draw my inspiration from experiences in my life. The narrative thread throughout the research process, and embedded within my life observations, is used to convey a sense of the journey that begins with Winterreise and closes with the English programme, and a sense of some of the journeys in my life that have brought me to this point.

3. Phenomenology relates to the broader purpose of this research as I worked
through my individual experiences and explore the essence of my journey of preparation and presentation. Its focus on a qualitative assessment of the unique perspective of an experience (Knowles & Cole (Eds.), 2008 and Minichiello & Kottler (Eds.), 2010.) aligns with my own desire to explore the motivations and inspirations behind my work. As reflections are undertaken and conclusions drawn toward the end of this work, phenomenology facilitates a general understanding of the depth of my internal journey and how it has informed observations throughout the process.

4. Practice-based research underscores all the activity undertaken throughout my doctoral journey. Though the relationship between practice and research remains a matter of debate (Borgdorff, 2007 & 2012), the growing field of practice-based research, now commonly referred to as artistic research, has nonetheless established the validity of research through which artists reflect critically upon their practice. The insights provided by reflective practitioners (a term established by Schon in 1995) are now widely recognised as contributing both to the development of their artistic practice and also to a wider understanding of the field. Many new forms of qualitative research across many disciplines are now established whereby the subjective perspective of the researcher is valued. (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005; Etherington, 2004) Moreover specifically relating to music, Coessens, Crispin & Douglas (2009) have argued strongly for research where the perspective of the performer is at the centre of the investigation.

**Literature and Resource Review**

The literature and resource pool for this project includes several clearly defined sections, each of which relate to a different part of my process of building the interpretations of the works in question. Each cycle has an associated body of scholarly work by musicologists who specialise in the life and/or works of each composer or the period in which each cycle was created. While my research is not based in historical musicology, it is, nonetheless, partly influenced by the discoveries and discussions related in the musicological literature that surrounds each piece and its composer. This body of knowledge provides a background to each cycle’s inception, to the context of their initial creations, and to the life and world of each composer and poet inspired to create these works. As each cycle provides a window into a different aspect of the themes of death and
transformation, so there is a body of literature around each of these perspectives and experiences which are explored through the musical works.

While there is, naturally, a world of academic literature that can be explored around death and transformation, of more relevance to this research is the wealth of material written from personal experience, which sheds light on the unique human relationship to these themes. Each of the experiences explored in the case study cycles has been very poignantly and movingly discussed in a number of memoirs, and through the letters, poetry, and fictional works of a number of sufferers of mental illness, grieving companions, and devoted journeymen and women. Depression and suicide, as explored in Schubert’s *Winterreise*, has a significant body of work relating it to the history of melancholia and depression that gives insights into the both the history of this disease and its place in the contemporary world. Grief and loss, as engaged with in Mahler’s *Kindertotenlieder* and Mussorgsky’s *Songs and Dances of Death*, can be informed by the writing that exists about the traditions and rituals surrounding death and dying. Journeys and cycles, which are the core thematic material of Butterworth’s *A Shropshire Lad* settings and Vaughan-Williams’ *Songs of Travel*, are examined by a number of writers who engage with the cycles of life and death, and the many journeys we undertake in life, most especially the journey to war which often has no path of return.

One issue that is not central to this research (but cannot be totally ignored) is that of gender. Many of these cycles have been approached by relatively few female performers and, in most cases, were explicitly written for men. As such, it will be important that I explore issues of gender during my experience of preparing these works and discuss my decision to engage with this repertoire that is sometimes considered to be inappropriate for women. As a female performer in the 21st century, I do not feel that any of the works I have chosen as case studies are either beyond my capabilities or should be off limits to me because of my gender. On the contrary, I’m quite sure that my unique interpretation of each of these cycles will, in part, owe some of its makeup to my female perspective. The fact that I am also a queer-identified woman will, no doubt, add another layer of complexity as many of the songs are written from the point of view of men addressing female lovers.
As this is a journey of both research and performance, a number of audio-visual references have contributed much to this project. These references fall into two categories – performances of the cycles being recreated, and material from other genres of performance that have common ground with the art of recital singing. The former category informs this work and my own performances in much the same way as do the musicological texts around each cycle. These performances provide valuable information about the performance histories, contexts, and trends associated with each cycle. In considering how I might build my own, unique interpretation of each cycle, I am also drawn to material from those disciplines that I see as complementary to classical recital singing. Building on an awareness of the recorded legacy of the relevant song cycle works and other recordings from complementary disciplines, I am seeking to develop my own distinctive interpretation, guided not only by classical singers, but also by those performers from complementary disciplines whose examples have much to offer this field of performance.

**Musicological Literature**

While there is a wealth of literature available on the history of the Romantic period, there are some key works which have been of particular assistance to my research in providing historical perspective. Tunbridge’s genre overview, *The Song Cycle* (2010), and Charles Rosen’s book *The Romantic Generation* (1995) are two of the key texts through which I have observed the unfolding development of the Romantic song cycle. From its opening chapters, Rosen’s text gives particular emphasis to the song cycles of the period including *Winterreise*. Moreover, his writing on the “elevation of the song from a minor genre to the vehicle of the sublime” (p. 124) links the rise of lyric landscape poetry to the development of the song-cycle. As well as making frequent reference to nature, each of these cycles also depicts vast inner landscapes, often juxtaposed with the outer landscape of the natural world achieving what Rosen notes as a great Romantic ideal “to give the lyrical expression of Nature an epic status, a genuine monumentality, without losing the apparent simplicity of a personal expression.” (p. 125). No cycle more closely follows this principle than Schubert’s *Winterreise*. Susan Youens’ book *Retracing a Winter’s Journey: Schubert’s Winterreise* (1991), analyses this cycle in depth and provides a close reading of both the poetry and music that make up this monumental work. In her detailed journey through each
of the twenty-four songs of the cycle, she provides a wealth of foundation knowledge for anyone “seeking to understand more deeply a work they love and interpreting it within their own historical, psychological, and cultural context” (p.xiv) – both core goals of mine in this research and performance journey. Peter Russell’s book *Light in battle with darkness: Mahler’s Kindertotenlieder* (1991), created from his own doctoral work, formed the basis of my understanding of Mahler’s *Kindertotenlieder*, and Richard Taruskin’s 1993 book *Musorgsky: Eight essays and an epilogue* acted in the same way for my understanding of Mussorgsky’s *Songs and Dances of Death*. Anthony Murphy (2012) and Michael Barlow’s (1997) writing on Butterworth opened the world of *Bredon Hill and A Shropshire Lad* for me, as did Hallmark (2003) and Heffer (2000) in their writing on Vaughan Williams and the *Songs of Travel*. Trevor Hold’s *Parry to Finzi: twenty English song-composers* (2002) was instructive on the compositional practices among English song composers around the turn of the nineteenth to the twentieth century. However, my investigations went beyond these texts in order to explore the larger themes of each work.

**Thematic Literature**

As mentioned above, each song cycle covered in this project offers its own perspective on the underlying themes of death and transformation, using particular experiences as catalysts to express their points of view. The wealth of complementary literature around each of these human experiences have informed the nature of my approach to each cycle and, I hope, given me deeper insights into the world that each musical work portrays. The literature covered in this section is not intended to represent a comprehensive overview of what has been written in each field of interest. Rather, the selections represent works that resonate with me and which I feel have best informed my progression through each song-cycle. No performer is ever completely removed from the world of the work they are interpreting, and many of my life experiences have come to bear on the decisions I make about my interpretations and the places from which I draw my inspiration. Alongside the development of my musical and academic abilities, my own struggles with depression, the proximity of death as I supported my partner through cancer treatment and recovery, and the many journeys of my life (which always produce a deep and insistent longing for home) are all part of the rich tapestry of experience that I bring to these interpretations. The literature I chose
for this area of my research represents that to which I am drawn in my quest to be both inspired by and well-informed on the thematic material of each work.

Schubert’s *Winterreise* examines death and transformation through the eyes of depression and suicidal ideation, and by describing a deeply transformative journey. The difficult and ultimately transforming human experience of depression is richly documented in literature that is both illuminating and painful. Poets such as Plath (*A Birthday Present*), Hopkins (*No worst, there is none*), and Dickinson (*I felt a funeral, in my brain*), among others, use the poetic form to describe their own failing mental health. A number of writers have shared their experiences in memoir, notably Kay Redfield Jamison (author of *An unquiet mind*, 1995, and *Touched with fire: Manic depressive illness and the artistic temperament*, 1993) and William Styron (*Darkness visible: A memoir of madness*, 1990). Styron’s description of death being “a daily presence blowing over me in cold gusts” (p.50) and his admission that as there seemed to be “no escape from this smothering confinement, it is entirely natural that the victim begins to think ceaselessly of oblivion” (p. 50) resonate with the journey presented in *Winterreise*, confirming that the pain of this journey, so unique to each sufferer, also holds some universal truths that might be explored by performers as they deliver this narrative to an audience. These common touchstones of the experience can be found in historic writing from figures such as Aristotle, Hildegard of Bingen, and Kant (these and many others are collected in the book *The nature of melancholy: From Aristotle to Kristeva*, edited by Jennifer Radden, 2000), and in modern writings on mental illness such as Andrew Solomon’s *The Noonday Demon: An atlas of depression* (2001), which reminds the reader of the “meaninglessness of every enterprise and every emotion, the meaninglessness of life itself” (p.15) for those who struggle with depression. Indeed, this sentiment encapsulates where Schubert’s journey eventually leads in the oblivion and detachment of “Der Leierman”.

While death lingers like a malignant shadow throughout *Winterreise*, it is brought to life with startling clarity and an almost visceral jolt in Mahler’s *Kindertotenlieder* and Mussorgsky’s *Songs and Dances of Death*. These cycles, dealing with the grief and loss inherent in death and its aftermath, characterise the transformational moment that comes about for both the dying individual and those left behind without their loved one. Notable memoirs of the death of a loved one
and the ensuing grief for those left behind can be found in the writing of authors such as Isabel Allende, Joan Didion and C.S. Lewis. Many people are also inspired to share their own experiences of dying. In the 2012 short film, *When I die: Lessons from the death zone* (and his book of the same name, 2012), Philip Gould shares his journey toward death in a spirit of hope and love. In a similar vein, Mitch Albom’s (2007) book *Tuesdays with Morrie* chronicles the optimistic and generous spirit of his former university professor, Morrie Schwartz, as his body deteriorates toward death. Gould’s genuine joy and Schwartz’s determination that he “would not wither [that] he would not be ashamed of dying [but] … he would make death his final project, the center point of his days …” (p. 10), reinforces the idea that, although humans are almost universally fearful of this final transformation, there is much to be learned and celebrated about the end of life. As *Kindertotenlieder* deals with the death of children, I have drawn some inspiration from works which are written for young people and in which young protagonists either die themselves or are used to introduce death to young readers. Research into death and dying form a core part of the literature for this case study. Various works by Elisabeth Kübler-Ross and Philippe Ariès’ comprehensive history of Western European attitudes toward death form the core of the literature I have called on for information on death and grief.

Butterworth’s settings of poems from A. E. Housman’s *A Shropshire Lad* and Vaughan Williams’ *Songs of Travel*, explore the natural cycles of life and death as one seamlessly transforms into the other and even, at times, are blended as when young men who will never age (often assumed to be future casualties of war) attend a village fair, or a dead man speaks to a friend from beyond the grave to ask how life continues without him. These cycles approach death and transformation as a journey, albeit a very different journey from that presented in *Winterreise* despite the similarities in the constant presence of the natural world as being almost another character in the narrative. These journeys are adventures - at times very terrible ones – describing a progression from one phase to another. Often infused with deep regret at loss, there is also a philosophical resolve in these cycles to accept that this is the normal pattern of life. It is an immutable law of nature that one thing passes away, giving rise to another; humanity is not exempt from or above the laws that govern all life. These cycles represent by turns grand adventures in nature and intimate portraits of human relationships. A.E. Housman,
who wrote the poems that Butterworth’s songs are set to, concealed many homoerotic references in his work that reflect the emotional life he kept secret while he was alive. The journeys of discovery that his poetic protagonists encounter are carefully layered and simplicity of language and imagery reveals, on closer inspection, a window into a number of life’s most challenging transformations, including that of death. The great cost of war (presented to many generations as one of life’s great adventures) weighs heavy on the Butterworth cycle – especially as he died in battle during World War I. The work of celebrated First World War poets, Wilfred Owen and Siegfried Sassoon was considered, as were various personal accounts of wartime experiences. The Vaughan Williams cycle’s poet, Robert Louis Stevenson, has long been associated with dashing exploits, and his other output in fiction, poetry, and letters has been central to my preparation of this cycle. Writing by and about Vaughan Williams note the many and varied seasons of that man’s long life. The transformational rites of passage that are represented by these works are often reflected in the lives of their composers and poets. Robert Frost’s poetry that often observes the confluence of the worlds of nature and humanity has been useful to this case study, as have fictional works by authors such as Faulkner (1942) and Hemingway (1952/R 1962), which explore similar territory.

Vocal Literature
As this research deals primarily with my own journey of discovery and interpretation through these song cycles, much of the current literature in the field of classical voice does not apply directly to this project. My research is not concerned with vocal pedagogy, the progression of the classical vocal career, or tips for better performance. The project is process-driven, and designed to illustrate one singer’s engagement with particular works and themes without emphasis on the achievement of a prescribed set of goals or outcomes beyond performance itself. Much of the writing that is available on recital singing, and the interpretation of song-cycles in particular, is of interest but often either recommends prescribed courses of action for successful performance or gives readings of cycles that are presented as definitive and without allowing much scope for further individual exploration.

For example, in his book, *The Schubert song cycles: With thoughts on*
*performance*, pianist Gerald Moore (1975) leads the reader through the song cycles of Schubert with particular attention given to his perception of the interpretive choices available to the performers through variables such as dynamic range, tonal colour, and technical effects (such as the use of *portamenti* in the voice). He is clear to the point of insistence on how various aspects of the cycle should be approached. In his writing on the final song in *Winterreise* (Der Leiermann), his note that the final phrase “demands an eager spirit from the singer and a *crescendo* is the natural outcome, but this must, simply must be kept within bounds” (p.172), is indicative of the attention to detail and the absolute certainty of position that comes through in much of the writing in this field (and, it should be noted, around this time). Lotte Lehmann (1971) opens her book *Eighteen song cycles: Studies in their interpretation* in a vein much more sympathetic to the philosophy of this project when she writes that she aims to provide “an approach which may be an aid towards the development of your individual conceptions” and that only the singer “who seeks it with his whole heart will find his own approach to interpretation” (p.1). However, she then proceeds to describe, in minute detail, what she considers to be an appropriate interpretation of each cycle. In her writing on the first song of *Winterreise* (Gute Nacht), she even goes so far as to advise that the singer’s “face should have an expression of deep sorrow as you begin the last verse. Prepare for it. Look downward during the interlude and then when the key changes slowly raise your head and gaze before you.” (p.46-47). Further sources where experienced singers share their experiences with this repertoire are considered below.

**Performance Literature**

Perhaps more relevant to this study than the literature around classical voice is the vast wealth of literature available on performance in general, particularly musical performance. Writing on the performer’s processes of thought, inspiration, practical application and reflection has recently become much more widely accepted and readily available. As noted above in relation to the field of practice-based research, there is a growing number of performers who are now willing to break the silence around their activities; silence which has traditionally suspended a kind of aura of magic around the act of preparation and performance. In their writing about their own disciplines, many artists shed light on the exposed nature of performance that is undertaken without the presence of the “fourth wall” and the importance of the vulnerability and authenticity that is so essential to this kind
of performing. The authenticity I am seeking throughout this project is summed up by Kivy (1995) as “originality, not slavish imitation; sincerity and truth to oneself, not false consciousness” (p. 6).

Few classical singers are represented in the genre of writing by artists about their own unique interpretive and creative processes. However, those singers that do write about their profession are quite prodigious in their output. Thomas Hampson (2010), in particular, has written and lectured extensively throughout his career, with his writing spanning musicology, vocal literature, and performance literature. In addition, mezzo-soprano, Joyce DiDonato, contributes to this field via her regular blog and vlog posts (DiDonato, 2011) – media which are increasingly popular among performing musicians. Writing on lives lived as performers by Galina Vishnevskaya (1984), Janet Baker (1982), Ian Bostridge (2011), and Linda Esther Gray (2007) have all contributed to my thinking around these cycles and the performances I am preparing. The latter is a particularly interesting case. Gray documents the demise of her career due to both physical and mental illness, something that has (in my search for literature) so far proved to be uniquely courageous among singers who write about their lives. Many singers tend to use memoir as another source of publicity for their performing activities and are generally loathe to reveal details of times when they were vulnerable or might have failed in one of their goals. The writing of other musicians has also been useful to me as I search for writing by practitioners about their experience in interpretation. These include works by conductors Leonard Bernstein (1954/R 1959) and Daniel Barenboim (2008), and pianists Gerald Moore (1966, 1975), Charles Rosen (2002, 2010), Martin Katz (2009), and Alfred Brendel (2001).

The series Arcana: Musicians on Music collects writing by musicians from a variety of fields, written in a variety of ways (from journalistic writing, to confessional personal pieces, to freeform poetic writing). For example, composer and performer, Gerry Hemingway (2000) links two supposedly unrelated artistic disciplines when he discusses the similarities between a comic’s and a musician’s sense of timing.

Looking at humour is in many ways a good (not to mention fun) way to appreciate timing. Working the crowd or the room is really the comic’s way of defining a relationship between the material he or she generates, and the way in which it is received. It is always different, not unlike the musician’s awareness of acoustic and concentration in the room. (p. 278).
It is not only the performance process that is shared in this field of writing, but also the often nebulous threads of inspiration that combine throughout life to provide the foundation for a performer’s approach to their art. For instance, Steven Shick (2006) shares his earliest musical memory in his book *The Percussionist’s Art: Same bed different dream*:

My earliest musical memory comes from a few years later. On a northern lake spring becomes official on the day that the winter ice breaks up. A week of warm weather had turned the ice on Clear Lake dark and mushy and on that day warm southerly winds broke it into chunks and pushed them slowly toward the north shore. By dusk the winter ice was nothing more than thousands of small pieces of ice washing up against a stone beach. I sat in front of my grandparents' house on the lake and listened to the sound of a giant but almost inaudible ice chime. (p. 116)

**Audio-visual Resources /Inspirational Performers**

This research has also been informed by a number of audio-visual resources as I sought out performers across a variety of disciplines who offer inspiring performances or thought provoking insights through their performance work and recorded interviews. The audio visual resources that inform this project fall into three main categories – resources on performance in general (across a number of art forms), resources that relate to the theme of each case study, and recorded performances of each of the song-cycles under preparation. From these three categories, I was able to develop a picture of the performance history of each work, the performances from other disciplines that might relate to each of the cycles in question, and how those varied art forms might stimulate new ideas and new approaches to these song-cycles that have been recreated again and again over almost two hundred years. Exploring these possibilities and reflecting on the ways in which such diverse sources of performance inspiration connect to the work I am undertaking has been enormously stimulating in figuring out my interpretive response to the repertoire in this project. Whether or not this influence is discernable to an outsider is something I am unable and uninterested to measure. I know that I have learned more about presenting oneself directly to an audience (which is exactly the case with recital singing) from these performers whom most people would not think to connect with the art or discipline of a classical vocal recital. Stand-up comedians have been a particular gift in this search. The permission they have to engage with some of the grittiest thematic material is something that traces back to fools and jesters of medieval times when hard truths could only be told by those who did so through the veil of humour. Similarly, recitalists can engage an audience in a performance conversation about
things that many people find hard to confront even in the company of beloved friends or family members. These comedians (and the performers from the other disciplines represented here) have so much in common with classical vocal recitalists. They often use their genre of performance art as a way in which to connect with audiences about fundamental life experiences and lessons, they speak directly to an audience without (or with very little) mediation, and although they repeat the same material in performance after performance, every delivery is slightly altered by the variables present at the time. While singers may often be trained in the rudiments of acting, these preparations usually focus on dramatic character acting for staged opera. The discipline of solo recital singing has more in common with arts such as stand-up comedy, jazz, cabaret, or spoken word poetry – activities where a single performer, using certain preordained parameters (such as chord structure, a narrative humour arc, pre-written text – parallels to the notes and words of a recitalist’s score), prepares an interpretation from within their own feelings toward, and relationship with, the material, and then makes myriad decisions and variations during each unique delivery. Though the product of these art forms varies dramatically, the discipline is similar.

A number of documentaries about, and interviews with, performers highlight some of the many similarities between recital singing and a variety of other disciplines. In the two-part BBC documentary series Imagine: The art of stand up, Alan Yentob (2011) explores the inner world of the stand-up comedian and its outer manifestation in performance. Similarly, the films Keith Jarrett – The art of improvisation (2005) and Woody Allen: A documentary (2012), give an insight into the experiences and inspirations that inform each artist’s approach to the work they undertake. Resources in this vein helped to demonstrate the many similarities between recital singing and art forms generally considered to be largely unrelated, by examining each discipline through the eyes of practitioners who are willing to be open about their relationship with their art form.

As noted in the earlier section on thematic literature, each case study programme has its own perspective on the themes of death and transformation, and resources were sourced that explore each of them as they were being prepared. In the case of audio-visual resources, performers from complementary artistic disciplines whose material and approach align with the cycles in question were considered. As with my selections of thematic literature, I have chosen a small sample of possible
performers whose work speaks to me about how I might approach my own interpretations throughout this project.

The first case study is a cycle of deep self-exploration and, ultimately, self-annihilation. Comedy performers Simon Amstell and Woody Allen – both known for their vulnerability in performance and self-deprecating humour – were considered alongside my preparation of Schubert’s *Winterreise*. Also relevant to the tone of that cycle are the performances of Edith Piaf and Jacques Brel, both of whom had careers that began in cabaret and whose output embodies a deep emotion and sense of nostalgia.

The emotionally visceral and confronting nature of the second case study programme (Mahler’s *Kindertotenlieder* and Mussorgsky’s *Songs and Dances of Death*) aligns with similarly confronting work in other disciplines. Eve Ensler’s and Whoopi Goldberg’s one woman shows present vignettes of life that, while initially appearing innocently humorous, quickly reveal themselves to have insidious undercurrents of traumatic experience. Stand up comedian Tig Notaro’s performance, delivered just days after her breast cancer diagnosis, delivers an extraordinary experience as many performance moments are simultaneously entertaining, educating, and shocking an audience.

The third case study programme (Butterworth’s *A Shropshire Lad* and Vaughan-Williams’ *Songs of Travel* settings) has a philosophical spirit of acceptance and a bold streak of adventure that is also embodied in the work of performers in complementary disciplines. Folk performer Mercedes Sosa, comedian Richard Pryor, and spoken word poetry performer Sarah Kay, all present work infused with compassionate consideration of the human condition and their work sparkles with the boldness and vitality that is often apparent in these song-cycles.

Each of the song-cycles being prepared and performed as part of this project have a rich recorded history from which I have been able to draw for inspiration. While I will consider a number of audio and video recordings of each work, analysis and evaluation of these resources will not form a focal point of the project as it is the intention of this research to focus on building new and unique interpretations. I will, of course, listen to what others have done and be influenced by them (even if
subliminally) but it is not the purpose of my research to focus on this aspect. Full documentation and analysis of the full recorded history of these song cycles is not a goal of this research and lies beyond its scope. Where relevant, I will discuss recordings that have been particularly inspiring to me or which relate to other discussion points raised, such as the issue of female performers singing works that were originally written for male voices.

**Gender Literature**
While issues of gender and sexuality are not central themes in my project, I have considered a select group of authors whose work sheds light on the phenomenon of a woman filling a role that might once have been intended exclusively for a man. Authors such as Judith Butler (2004 and 1990), Judith Halberstam (1998 and as interviewed in Williams, 2011), Marcia Citron (1993), and Susan McClary (1991) within the broader fields of feminism have been consulted. Of course issues of gender have been increasingly foregrounded in many writings about music in recent times (Taylor, 2012 & 2009). The ideas from these scholars helped to clarify my own thinking around the relationship between my gender and my work. This research does not seek to explore the gendered position of these song cycles or their creators. Rather, it centres on my own responses and my experiences while preparing each work. Raewyn Connell’s (2005/R 2011) introductory text on the field of masculinities research (published before her gender transition from male to female) was also useful in the insights it offered into contemporary societal ideas on masculinity and mens’ lived experiences.

**Chapter Structure**
My research is presented in the form DVD recordings of each of my performances of the case study programmes, supported and illustrated by this exegesis. The exegesis is built around the case study recital programmes. Each programme has a dedicated chapter, all of which follow the structure outlined below. Following this template allows the reader to compare and contrast the various influences on interpretation and to gain an appreciation of the variety of life experiences that might come into play for a performer approaching repertoire that works around similar thematic material. Short narrative autoethnographic pieces are interspersed throughout each chapter under each sub-heading.
Context
This section looks at the context in which I make my initial engagement with the repertoire. It also outlines the historical context of the creators of the music and poetry of the cycle(s) under discussion and the external and/or internal variables that might have influenced each work’s inception.

The Thematic Landscape
This section takes a broad view of the material used in each cycle through which the themes of death and transformation are encountered. In Winterreise this is depression and suicidal ideation, in Kindertotenlieder and Songs and Dances of Death it is physical death and the grief experience, and in Bredon Hill and other songs and A Shropshire Lad and Songs of Travel it is journeys and cycles through nature and life. The autoethnographic pieces similarly discuss how these experiences have manifested in my own life.

Perspectives on Death/Perspectives on Transformation
These next two sections explore the particular perspectives each programme has to offer on death or transformation individually. These sections (and the previous, more general overview) are primarily where influential literature, poetry, memoir and other forms of writing are discussed. The autoethnographic sections here explore my particular life experiences that align with each cycle’s thematic material which have helped to form my own perspective on death and transformation.

The Performance Landscape
This section covers the performance and recording history of each work as has been transmitted to me through the recordings that have been most meaningful to my preparation or the historical performances about which I have read. As mentioned above, the performers considered in this section (and the following) by no means represent an exhaustive list of what I think might be useful to other performers. Rather, they are an indication of things that have made an impact on me during the time of preparation for each performance. This section’s autoethnographic material begins to delve into my experiences while preparing each concert programme.
Performance Inspiration
This final section looks closely at some of the performers from complementary disciplines that have provided me with inspiration and guidance through their output in their own genres. The autoethnography here follows on from the previous section to describe my experiences as each performance approaches and is given. Each chapter closes with a brief autoethnographic postlude.

The concluding chapter of this work discusses the major insights that have been important to this process and the resulting performances. I also discuss future research directions that can come from the work presented here and possible ramifications for the scholarly and performance communities resulting from the research undertaken here.

Concluding Remarks
This project was conceived to explore the building and delivery of programmes around the themes of death and transformation. It demonstrates and documents one performer's contribution of experience and background to the recreations of these song cycles, and discovers support and inspiration for recital performances from other complimentary solo performance disciplines that may offer some insight into the recital process. In undertaking this research it is not my intention to add to the already very full areas of instruction on vocal technique and direction on interpretation via a set of prescribed variables that might be controlled for an ideal performance. Rather, this project is intended to be a documentation of one singer’s journey through this music as I find my own voice, discover what I have to say through the music that is unique, and explore where these inspirations come from and where they might lead. It is my hope that sharing my own experience of building these unique interpretations might inspire other performers to make similar investigations about interpretations of their own, teachers to encourage their students to explore and make use of their own experience and environments, and audiences to relate to performers and musical works in new and more immediate ways. I also hope that other classical voice researcher/performers might consider writing in this way, embracing the openness and vulnerability that I consider to be so valuable in the performance of music and aim to espouse throughout this process. I believe that these works, and others based on the deeper
themes of human existence, deserve open, honest, and truly engaged performers to interpret them – performers with all the flaws of humanity that this music and these poems were so carefully and lovingly created to convey.
CHAPTER 1: THE SHADOW OF DEATH

Schubert Winterreise

No one who understands another’s pain, and no one who understands another’s joy! We always believe we are going towards one another, and always we merely pass by one another. O torment for him who realises this!

(Schubert, March 1824)\(^1\)

Schubert’s Winterreise is regarded by many as the pinnacle of song cycle repertoire, and it presents unique challenges to the singer and pianist. At over an hour in length and being “an encyclopedic musical study of melancholy and depression” (Kramer in Emmerson 2009, p.102) it is a work that is both physically and emotionally taxing. It requires expert precision between singer and pianist and asks much of an audience’s focus as their protagonist draws them through a long and terrible inward journey of despair and loss. The manifold challenges to the singer include a variety of technical aspects in the use of the voice to colour the musical and textual material, physical and emotional stamina to maintain the quality of the vocal line and the integrity of this bleak journey, and a high level of communication with a pianist partner in order to deliver a work that is more duet than soloist and accompanist. Significant to this research, Winterreise represents a challenge in delivering and maintaining a long narrative arc in the downward spiral of one person’s fall through depression and towards suicide, while still illustrating the myriad variations of emotion within this long, bleak work. While death casts a long shadow over the whole of the narrative, the physicality of dying is never directly engaged with. Rather, the transformation of the protagonist takes the majority of the focus as layers of emotion and mind are gradually peeled away to leave us with someone who is more dead than alive.

Context

It is March 2012, I am 32 years old and approaching Winterreise for the first time. Already I am older than Schubert ever was. Benjamin Britten and Peter Pears have said (kadoguy, 2011) that this cycle cannot successfully be approached until a more advanced age – perhaps around 50 (kadoguy, 2011). This is

\(^1\) From the liner notes of “Schubert Lieder” (Harmonia Mundi CD, 2008), Bernada Fink (mezzo-soprano), Gerold Huber (piano)
something I hear again from a singer who was once a student of Pears; he sang his first Winterreise at 55. Am I too young? I have reached a stage in a singer’s life where I have become too old for many competitions and young artist programmes; in fact, too old to be considered young or up and coming in an industry that increasingly favours youth and beauty. I struggle often with the thought that I should have done more with my life by now. A teacher once told me that if you haven’t established a successful career by 25 or 26, you’re never going to. Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau first sang Winterreise at 17. So perhaps I am too old for this to be my first attempt. I like to think that my age has little to do with my suitability to sing this music. However, it has always been my way (lacking in self-confidence as I am) to try to find my place by assessing myself against others’ benchmarks. I cannot imagine the luxury of being free of the insecurities that require me to measure up to the perceived greatness of everybody else. I have set myself no small challenge in choosing this work to prepare first in my doctoral process; of all the programmes, this will be the longest, the most involved in the work with a pianist, and (I suspect) the most emotionally draining due to its many similarities to my own life experiences. I am about to leap into the deep end and I suspect that I may be poorly prepared for some of the challenges that lie ahead.

Winterreise’s poet, Wilhelm Müller, and its composer, Franz Schubert, were true contemporaries; Müller was only 3 years older than Schubert and died the year before Schubert passed away. However, it seems that that their paths never crossed and that the poet never heard the composer’s settings of his earlier work, Die schöne Müllerin (Youens, 1991, p.5). What they would have shared is a cultural context by which both the poetry and the music of this cycle were informed and to which each artist had their own unique reactions. Vienna’s artistic community suffered under extremely rigid censorship at the time (Müller had a particularly difficult relationship with the censors). Heavy government monitoring of artistic works in public places played its part in the growth of private performing in salons along with a growing middle class who could afford both a piano in the home and music lessons for their children. The ability to read both words and music was also spreading among the general population (most especially the expanding middle class), and both artists were catering to audiences steeped in the works of Goethe and Schiller. The former’s work, Die leiden des jungen Werthers (The Sorrows of Young Werther), was such an enormous success
that it influenced fashion, engendered copycat suicides, and its protagonist became “a model for living who set a whole style of high feeling and despair” (Alvarez, 1971, p.230).

A musical work like Winterreise surely owes much of its existence to themes of bitter emotion and deep inner pain being part of the public imagination and being strongly associated with great literary art. Besides the public appetite for this kind of work, both creators had strong influences whose presence is surely felt in the resulting combination of their two talents. Müller was an admirer, reviewer, and translator of the works of Lord Byron, a man who spent most of his life waging “a consuming civil war within his own mind” and whose poetry explored many combinations of dark emotions including “foreboding, aloneness, regret, and a dark sense of lost destiny and ill-used passions” (Jamison, 1993, pp.150-152). Schubert’s music came to life under the imposing shadow of Beethoven, not least of all because the latter also lived in Vienna and was still alive until the year before Schubert’s death. Beethoven’s earlier work An die ferne Geliebte (1816) may be the first example of a song cycle (Tunbridge, 2010, pp.6-7), a form which Schubert adopted and expanded in the following decade in his two settings of Müller’s poetry. While Winterreise may have some important differences from Beethoven’s cycle (Youens, 1991, pp.73-74), Beethoven’s influence on the younger composer is undeniable and Schubert would have been aware of the older composer’s precedent in the song cycle.

The poet and composer created their Winterreise in quite different times in their lives. Müller was recently married and, with a few exceptions, led a largely happy and fulfilled life (Youens, 1991, p.8). His own sense of wanderlust might have found an outlet in these poems, and many of the descriptions of the physical settings certainly owe much to the personal experience of growing up in a small town and spending time in country surrounds. However, the inner turmoil of this work, besides being an important part of the art of any Romantic poet and a common theme in the work of his hero, Byron, is not known to be something with which Müller identified and he does not appear to have been seeking an outlet for such emotions in his work (Youens, 1991, p.8). Schubert, by comparison, was living in a relative state of unrest. By the time he approached his work on this cycle, his own imminent death would have been apparent as he had been ailing
from syphilis since 1823 and knew that his health would have been unlikely to improve. His writings around this time are testament to his suffering - both physical and emotional - and although he continued to compose until his death, life with his illness was at the very least unpleasant; at most it would have been unbearable. However, while Schubert’s affinity for the inner world of the cycle’s protagonist may be apparent, his experience of the physical context would have come more from things he had read or heard about than any actual lived experience in the countryside. Schubert’s life was centred around Vienna and, besides some work and travel excursions, he would not have had Müller’s identification with country living and the call of the road through the wilderness. However, imagery of nature as a metaphorical reflection of the inner world was central to the emerging languages of Romanticism and although the journey may not have literally been something Schubert felt called upon to undertake it was no less real for that. Both creators seem to have been perfectly poised to offer a unique combination of their artistry and experience to bear on the component parts of this cycle in much the same way that performers are called to do every time they approach Winterreise.

The Thematic Landscape

My breakdown happens in April 2008. I haven’t sung in months. My time is spent working toward a Master of Business Administration so that I might be qualified for a “real” job (whatever that is), and can support my family unit if it turns out my partner is too sick to continue to work. It’s an intensive, pressure cooker course, designed to weed out the weak. If I am awake, I am working. There is no time for hobbies or relaxing. A friend is taking care of my horse – I don’t have time to see him anymore. I begin the year trying to take Friday evenings off; that doesn’t last long. I am lost to myself – there is no creativity in my life and the work I am pursuing is anathema to my philosophy of living in a compassionate and humanly engaged way.

We’re in Auckland, visiting family, when I break. Lying in bed, the panic sets in – the realisation that I have lost that little light that made me who I am, and that it might never be returned to me. I begin to shake and cry; the air catches in my chest and I can hardly breathe; I’m engulfed in a freezing chill that seems to emanate from my bones. The next day we fly home and there is nothing left of me.
I face the world like an empty shell – the air seems to pass through me, rather than around me, and people and places surround me in a blur. A heavy weight drags on me as I pull myself through the day. It is all I can do to make it home, driven only by the thought that I might get to bed, close my eyes, and never open them again.

I feel broken. I just don’t work anymore. Mostly I feel a cavernous, empty nothingness, punctuated by acute attacks of anxiety that leave me breathless, shaking, and frozen. Tears are something to be feared – once the healing release of stress or worry, they’re now an overture to uncontrollable and unexplainable outbursts of grief and pain. If I do begin to cry, it seems I will never stop. But at least they are something. For the most part, I feel nothing – a black void that makes my existence seem completely without interest, value, or worth. Some part of me sees what is happening – I feel my body drawing into itself, my eyes glaze over, my voice struggling to come out. I can barely bring myself to speak – it’s too much effort and, besides, I have nothing worth saying anymore. My days are spent in almost total exhaustion. Thinking back on it now, I can hardly recall details, days, events – everything is a blur. All I recall is this constant state of being. But my body remembers. My stomach is clenched as I write this, my heart is pounding, my breath catches in my chest. It’s not easy to look back on that time and my body sends me warning now that to look too closely into the abyss could be to fall right back in.

I’m taken to the doctor. I don’t see the point to this – every day is much the same as the last. I resist but don’t have the energy to resist hard. I can’t look him in the eye and, when asked to explain how I’m feeling, my voice doesn’t seem to work. He prescribes anti-depressant medication, which I duly take. I have little hope that this, or anything else, might help but a few days later I wake without feeling exhausted and am able to get out of bed.

Winterreise’s basic narrative follows a jilted man walking, without direction or purpose, through the winter landscape. This simple premise sets the scene for a deep exploration of character, an investigation into nature and its relationship to man, and a meditation on humanity and the interior landscape of human suffering. The protagonist who takes us on this winter journey is a young artist; this set of
poems was published in the second volume of Müller’s *Poems from the Posthumous Papers of a travelling French Horn Player* and we know from the text of the final song *Der Leiermann* that the previous 23 poems have all been songs that he now seems destined to repeat in the course of a kind of purgatorial half-life at which he has arrived. The journey that he undertakes throughout the cycle is described by Susan Youens (1991, pp.66-67) as a possible metaphor for the Romantic idea of the “Künstlerberufung or artist’s discovery of his calling”.

For Müller’s wanderer, the signpost at the crossroads is a revelation of destiny: not the death he has desired so fervently but continued life, furthermore, life as a musician, a singer-poet irrevocably set apart from society and condemned to an existence without the ‘beloved soul’ for whom he longs. If the vision of the path destined for him is interpreted in this way, the wanderer’s despair in ‘Das Wirtshaus’ acquires new meaning. He has yearned, first, for reciprocated love and domesticity and then for a nihilistic death, not an artist’s lonely existence. The recognition that he is forever beyond the realm of ‘bright, happy life’ is unbearable and it calls forth once again the desire for death.

This journey of terrible discovery is undertaken through a landscape that mirrors the bleak nature of its eventual conclusion and the stark emotional world that is concurrently being navigated; it is inconceivable that Müller would ever have chosen for this character to undergo a *Sommerreise*. With the exception of the hurdy-gurdy player in the final song, the wanderer never interacts with another human, and the forces and inhabitants of the winter wildnerness through which he walks are the catalysts for his musings, his memories, and his self-discoveries.

While we are discovering more and more about the central character of this work, both poet and composer are also bringing the natural, exterior world into focus as much more than mere background context. The winds, storms, and eerie silences of nature’s winter ritual can be heard often in the music of the cycle as they give rise to, reflect, or support the wanderer’s state of mind. As the protagonist addresses elements of nature such as snow, a river, or a lone crow, seeking for answers to his fate and his ongoing suffering, piano and voice are used to illustrate both the mood of the wanderer and the object of his attention. By elevating the natural world to the level of a supporting, if not equal, character in *Winterreise* that interacts with the wanderer, both Müller and Schubert are realising “one of the ideals of the period: to give the lyrical expression of Nature an epic status, a genuine monumentality, without losing the apparent simplicity of a personal expression” (Rosen, 1995, p.125).
Both character and setting lay the foundation for this work to extend far beyond a simple narrative tale and to become, at its heart, a contemplation on humanity, its shortcomings, sufferings, and losses. Seen through the prism of our protagonist’s slowly shattering mind, these dark and painful aspects of human experience are brought into sharp relief as they relate to the wanderer’s personal experience and each performer’s and audience member’s experience of these themes in their own lives. What was the Romantic notion of melancholy has become, at the time of writing this paper, the more modern phenomenon of depression; an experience with which many contemporary performers and audience members are familiar, either as sufferers or observers of those who suffer. The nature and causes of joy, along with its various outlets in human expression, change almost from one generation to the next. However, there is a quality in melancholy that seems to arc across the centuries. Andrew Solomon’s (2001, p.15) description of depression could just as easily describe the experience of the early nineteenth century wanderer:

Depression is the flaw in love. To be creatures who love, we must be creatures who can despair at what we lose, and depression is the mechanism of that despair. When it comes, it degrades one’s self and ultimately eclipses the capacity to give or receive affection. It is the aloneness within us made manifest, and it destroys not only connection to others but also the ability to be peacefully alone with oneself. … In depression, the meaninglessness of every enterprise and every emotion, the meaninglessness of life itself, becomes self-evident. The only feeling left in this loveless state is insignificance.

That the music and text of Winterreise so accurately capture this experience is evident in its enduring legacy; this is a work that is as much physically and emotionally felt as performed or heard, and audiences and performers return to it in recognition of its power and relevance.

**Longing for death**

How often have I wanted to die? It’s not so much an occurrence that has any kind of regularity or typical schedule. Rather, it is a constant drone; a ground bass over which my life continues its shaky trajectory. As a teenager, certainly, but don’t all teenagers want to die? Taking the first steps in discovering the person I was becoming was no walk in the park, given that much of my nature appeared to be so different from the norm. As a young married woman in my early twenties (and, only a few short years later, a young divorcée), life seemed to be something I was managing very badly. An ill-conceived marriage followed by a tempestuous
relationship with a drinking alcoholic only served to prove to me that life was not a task at which I was even remotely adept. Now, in my mid-thirties, one breakdown and scattered attempts at a career behind me, every day mutters a question under its breath. Should you be here? What’s the point? Haven’t you failed at everything you’ve tried to do? Müller and Schubert come together in Die Nebensonnen to describe this feeling far better than I ever could. When continuing in the light of life is so hopeless, surely I would be better off in the dark.

Is death actually attainable? However much I might want it, the practicalities of creating an actual, physical death are no small obstacle to achieving the desired end. No matter how much this wanderer and I might welcome death with open arms, we somehow fall short of fulfilling our end of the bargain. However, death is always hovering nearby, waiting for us to seize the opportunity. Doors are opened for us both that we need only step through to attain our goal. On a cliff edge, looking over one of the meeting places of the Pacific Ocean and the Tasman Sea, the desire to climb over the lookout is so strong it makes me nauseous. Standing on a balcony in Brisbane with a group of friends, a conversation is struck about how frightening it is to be up high in case an accident might happen. I am the only person present who is unafraid of accidents – being this high up only makes me nervous that today could be the day that I finally take Death’s hand and decide to jump.

Death casts a long shadow over this work and while a physical death is never directly described or experienced by the wanderer, he is variously haunted by its presence, fearful of its coming, and longing for its finality. The cycle is full of suicidal ideation – the wanderer’s fantasy of finding rest beneath the linden tree, his desire to take a bed in the graveyard that he imagines as an inn, his certainty that he would be better off in the dark. However, he never achieves his end. As Alvarez (1971, p.107) notes, the difficulty about suicide is that “it is an act of ambition that can be committed only when one has passed beyond ambition”. The wanderer’s lack of ambition does not free him from the constant presence of death. Rather it is an ever present reminder that he is doomed to a far worse fate. Death almost flaunts itself to him as he begins to realise that his path will lead not to a comforting finality and release of pain, but to a prolonged suffering that will
haunt him for as long as he continues to drift through his life. In this way he fulfills an ideal for his period as “the function of the Romantic suicide cult is to be a focus for wandering melancholy; almost nobody dies.” (Alvarez, 1971, p.158)

The lingering presence of death is something keenly felt by sufferers of depression through the ages as they long for their own release. Sylvia Plath (1981, p.254-255), in her poem *Death & Co*, written months before she would go on to take her own life, describes a scene that would not be out of place in the wanderer’s experience:

I do not stir.
The frost makes a flower,
The dew makes a star,
The dead bell,
The dead bell.

Somebody’s done for.

If our own death is unattainable, it may become a kind of brutal companion, driving the sufferer on to bitter hard-heartedness as in *Stürmische Morgen*, when the wanderer realises that his heart’s image is reflected in the coldness and savagery of winter. Reflecting on her journey with depression, Virginia Heffernan (Casey, 2002, p.14) finds a similar bitterness in herself:

I paced quickly through the Pillar rituals, feeling hot flashes of meanness – glad to see people suffer, glad that someone got into a divorce mess, very glad that a man slept with an empty Mad Dog bottle hugged to his chest on my building’s front steps. *Good, I hope he dies*, I thought, and it seemed like a new alliance – with death now, which I imagined as an I-beam, slamming through my chest.

The agents of death are everywhere in Schubert’s cycle, as illustrated in the various omens that the wanderer discovers on his path. Many of the elements of a winter landscape are bound to bring death if endured for too long, and the snow, ice, winds, and storms in this work all loom as threats to human existence all the while, paradoxically, sustaining this traveller in his musings. In his focus on the elements around him, he forgets his pain and it is not until he stops to rest in the tenth song of the cycle that he notices the physical and emotional distress he is in. Death speaks more directly to the wanderer through agents such as the linden tree that invites him to rest beneath it, the crow flying overhead as though waiting to feed on his corpse (interestingly, the collective noun for the animal in English is a murder of crows), and the graveyard that seems as welcoming as an inn on the road. Death also speaks to the wanderer in his own thoughts; his comparison of a
stream being to the ocean as pain is to its grave, his lament at the distance still to go until the tomb, and his tears over the grave of his hopes.

Our protagonist’s desire for death is ever present, if not always completely discernable. From his first wish to leave unnoticed and almost unremembered, to his longing for a final sunset in which to ultimately find peace, his feelings are clear – this is someone who would prefer to leave the world, rather than be forced to continue to live in it. Sadly, for some, and certainly for this antihero, death is not a state that is simply chosen, and melancholics who would seek it often lack the physical drive (or ambition, as mentioned above) to carry out what is necessary to die.

If you have never tried it yourself or helped someone else through it, you cannot begin to imagine how difficult it is to kill yourself. If death were a passive thing, which occurred to those who couldn’t be bothered to resist it, and if life were an active thing, which continued only by virtue of a daily commitment to it, then the world’s problem would be depopulation and not overpopulation. An awful lot of people lead lives of quiet desperation and don’t kill themselves because they cannot muster the wherewithal to do it. (Solomon, 2001, p.276)

So the wanderer is trapped in a kind of half-life – it is not the happy life of his memories or dreams, nor the absolute finality of death for which he yearns. While Winterreise’s wanderer never reaches the longed for destination of death’s oblivion, his path is one which gradually makes its way toward an inevitable conclusion for a lone man walking such a dangerous, freezing road, with an ever decreasing capacity for care of his well-being or his life. All but the last vestiges of his humanity gradually leave him until he is left with only the contemplations on his experience captured in his songs as his connection to a life he once lived. He has predicted that the thawing of his heart as he adjusts to his new existence will sever his connection with his beloved (Erstarrung), he has no further relation with society’s mechanisms (Die Post), and he leaves towns and villages which now have no place for him among their residents (Rückblick and Im Dorfe). There is no escape from his pain and he is destined to relive it as often as he sings his songs. Emily Dickinson (Moore & Porter (Eds.), 1993, p.95), writing one hundred years before Sylvia Plath composed Death & Co., describes a path which mirrors that of the movement toward death in Winterreise:

The Heart asks Pleasure – first
And then – Excuse from Pain –
And then – those little Anodynes
That deaden suffering –
And then – to go to sleep –
And then – if it should be
The will of its Inquisitor
The privilege to die -

A Transformational Journey

It is September 2012. For some years now I have been managing my depression without medication. It’s not an easy task and the rollercoaster of emotions can be difficult to cope with at times but I’m glad to be drug free and to know that, although my emotional state can veer wildly and suddenly downward, I am at least feeling something in place of the bland and uninteresting nothingness that is both the gift and the curse of medication. But the cracks are beginning to show and I am less able to manage the hard times when they come. The signs are there that I’m falling, and falling fast. Sounds are too loud, people too close, life around me too fast. I can’t watch the news anymore – I find the stories too troubling and become disproportionately upset about world events. I see a television programme about the plight of the koala that leaves me in floods of tears and terrified about the animal’s future for days after. My work begins to suffer. At a doctoral seminar weekend, I can barely keep my eyes open – exhaustion and lethargy have once again set in. I try to sing and nothing seems to work. My voice is beginning to leave me again. I’m horrified – I know where this is headed, what is beginning to take shape within me. I know what I have to do but I’m afraid that being medicated again will bring about another kind of transformation – one that will leave me without the heart or emotional scope to get the most out of my work.

Months later, it’s clear that the drugs have not come to my aid as effectively as they once did. In the change-over period between different treatments, I’m reminded why I miss the unmedicated life and why it is so destructive for me. I feel alive and free from chemical restraint. However, it’s not long before my anxieties begin to overtake me and a cavernous well of sadness and doubt is opened up inside my being.

When I’m thinking rationally, and being very honest with myself, I know that my depression has its beginnings long before the breakdown; that, in fact, the breakdown was only my mind’s way of finally caving in to decades of pressure. I can see myself walking alone in the middle of the night alongside the frozen river
in Prague; I recall the blank emptiness of my first wedding night; I can still feel the hot tears streaming down my teenage face after another demoralising singing lesson with a woman who will never give me the approval I long for (although I spend years trying to earn it). And, beyond that, is the pain laid out behind me – the legacy of generations of dysfunction gifted to me at birth and fostered in me as a small child. It feels like defeat to admit that this path was laid out for me before I was born. So much easier to say that once, I got sick, and I broke, and now some things are harder than they used to be. Like the wanderer – once, there was a girl, and she stopped loving me, and now things have changed. But aren’t things really always as they were? Fremd bin ich eingezeugt, Fremd zie ich wieder aus – I arrived a stranger, a stranger I depart. But aren’t we always strangers everywhere we go, he and I?

This winter journey represents one of the most dreaded and, sadly, most often encountered transformations in the human experience – that of a deteriorating mind and an eroding desire for life. It is a gradual process of unbecoming; of being torn from that which makes us ourselves and sliding into a dark place of indistinguishable feature and character. When all is suffering, even suffering itself loses its piquancy and becomes another indefinable part of existence. Although Winterreise ends with a portrait of a mind in tatters, it opens with a narrator in a rational, decisive, and analytical frame of mind. His experiences, while bleak, are carefully related, often in a tone of curious observation and reluctant acceptance. This wanderer is more likely to inquire after what this experience might be rather than why it should be happening to him. Even in Der Wegweiser, when he asks what might be sending him down this path when he has done nothing wrong, his question is seeking the compulsion that drives him to wander, not questioning why he should be afflicted with it.

Beyond self-pity, the wanderer subjects both actions and emotions to psychic self-dissection decades before Freud’s scientific framework for such investigations. His solitude is not only the anguished withdrawal of a rejected lover but a necessary laboratory for existential research. (Youens, 1991, p.56)

The transformation that the wanderer goes through on this journey is a gradual movement towards unbecoming; the more he discovers about himself and his motives, the more those layers of self are stripped away and the meaningless nature of his existence becomes increasingly apparent to him. Through the filter of his melancholy, which acts as a catalyst for his gradually increasing wish for
death, he is being transformed from a person with connections, purpose, and a place in the world of humanity to a wraith-like version of someone who once had all those former trappings of a life which is now lost. This transformation is one mirrored in the present day, as in the writing of Darcey Steinke (in Casey, 2001, pp.64-66) describing her own existence after such a transformational experience being a feeling that “I had killed myself and was only a ghost now come back to lurk around” and that, although able to resume her life, she was “still uncertain who, after my collapse, I really was”. Larry McMurray, writing of a similar transformation following major surgery, describes “attempting to live as someone similar to, but not identical with, my real self” and that what he felt “as the trauma deepened, was that while my body survived the self that I had once been had lost its life.” (Casey, 2001, pp.67-69)

This kind of transformational experience gradually sees the wanderer leaving behind one world and entering another as he shuns human society. He refers to it less and less and is finally left lost in an internal purgatory from which there may well be no escape. It has been argued that the character of Der Leiermann is, in fact, a chance at salvation for our protagonist (Moore, 1975, p.170). I disagree – from my perspective, this hurdy-gurdy player, if he exists in reality at all, is only confirmation that the wanderer is lost in an endless cycle of torment as he prepares to sing once again all the songs he has just previously narrated. The ways in which this transformation will in turn affect performers and audiences are as varied as there are people who will approach this work. It would be difficult to imagine a person who could engage with this cycle without being changed by it in some way. Emily Dickinson’s words, while not written about Winterreise, (Dickinson, 1890) seem to capture both the transformation of the wanderer and the sensation of being enveloped in his world for the seventy or so minutes of the cycle:

This is the Hour of Lead –
Remembered if outlived,
As Freezing persons recollect the Snow –
First – Chill – then Stupor – then the letting go -

**The Performance Landscape**

*My journey through Winterreise has also become a journey through a musical*
world with which I was sure I was completely familiar – that of the piano and pianists. I’m shocked to discover how little I know about the instrument as new sounds and colours are revealed with every pianist’s unique interpretation, and I am fascinated by the way in which the piano seems to mirror each player. It seems to magnify personality traits that I have observed in them or expose things that are not apparent in what I know so far of the person behind the instrument.

I work on part of Winterreise with more than 15 pianists – I run it completely with 12 of them. Each pianist opens a door to a new world of colour, sound, and emotion, and each one also opens a door into themselves. I wonder if they know they’re doing it. Many of them are very dear old friends; some are more recent additions to my life. Each musical partnership speaks volumes about both of us and the way in which we relate to each other. One run is dry, precise, icy – the pianist’s sharp wit and tendency to understatement shining through in his portrayal of the wanderer’s emotional and physical landscapes. Another pianist, who has known me for over twenty years, plays alongside me like a shadow. She never once leaves my side – she reads me as well as she always has – and envelopes me in the support and warmth that have always been her trademarks in our relationship. Her years of dramatic operatic work seep into her interpretation. This is Schubert the Romantic; others bring a more Classical style of playing to bear on this piece. One pianist colours this winter world with fire – fury and frustration are the emotions that bring Schubert’s wanderer alive for them. I’m shocked when the rage gives way during Der Lindenbaum and Frühlingstraum, and is replaced by a heartbreaking delicacy and vulnerability; these two songs clearly go to a place that is rarely touched and not given up lightly. The immediate and unquestionable intimacy that this work engenders between singer and pianist is evident every time I sing it through.

The power of this work to bring two musicians together in an instantly symbiotic relationship is most apparent to me when working with pianists who are new to me. I go into the studio knowing very little (if anything) about them and emerge every time with a complete portrait of a musician and (without exception) a new friend with whom I have already shared an extremely intimate experience. I sing towards them (I always rehearse in this way) and as our eyes meet every now and then throughout the piece, I can feel the veil that exists between strangers or
casual acquaintances gradually lifting. Much is revealed about each person as we play and sing, and even more is revealed to me about myself, my approach to working with this new musician, and the way in which my approach to the cycle is altered to encompass this new relationship. One American-trained pianist I sing with has a beautiful new instrument in his studio – a precious and significant gift to himself. He caresses the keys, carefully places chords, and touches running phrases with the delicate hand of someone in love. His care for the instrument is such that I almost feel we have a third collaborator with us. His approach to Schubert’s music, and to working with me, is no less studied. He sweats hard with the effort of maintaining an intense focus that is divided between the score and absorbing what I am doing. In response, I feel myself drawn further into the score and its details in an effort to give back as much careful precision as I am receiving. I notice that he is breathing with me and so my breath settles as I try to give him the clearest indications I can. His sincerity and honesty of approach shine through in his interpretation and his broad Classical style of playing reaches into Romanticism for the larger moments in the piece. He is a study in dedication and his ordered, formal, reverent approach encourages me to create a narrative that is to the point, open, and clear-eyed.

Not long after that, I am running the work with another new pianist whose approach is strictly Classical – his light touch and crisp, clear phrases make the music sparkle and a brighter tone rings out in my voice in response. He has an obvious idea of the piece as one long narrative rather than a series of thoughts or episodes – there is barely a break between songs. As I feel the effect of one song leading almost seamlessly into the next, my interpretation shifts. There are very few sudden emotional changes in my delivery today. Rather each new song’s vocal tone picks up where the last left off and builds or diminishes from that standpoint. Without the breaks between songs, I have the feeling of holding this pianist’s hand very tightly as we skate and weave through the whole journey with barely a pause. Eye contact is minimal and brief. At this time, my familiarity with the cycle has built to the point where I barely need the score and being free from it while navigating this pianist’s approach feels like taking my hands off the safety rail of a roller-coaster – thrilling, a little dangerous, but almost embodying the spontaneity of a live performance. This run is operated mostly by feel and my rapport with this new musician is obvious. Of all the pianists I’ve worked with so far, this one has
played Winterreise the most and his ease with the piece (even in my unusual keys) is translated to me. I know I can relax and allow instantaneous ideas to be realised; any direction I might take is readily adopted and enhanced by his work at the piano.

I have a similarly sympathetic run with a pianist who is in the process of becoming a conductor. He’s ready to lead this work and I have no objections to following in his style and approach for the sake of learning a new way to look at this cycle. His playing is Romantic and emotional, so I instinctively jump in with both feet and deliver a wanderer whose heartbreak is palpable and whose mind shatters into pieces, rather than slips away from him. There’s no other way to sing with this partner – the dramatic sighing, wailing, whispering, and howling coming out of the piano won’t allow for a detached, observational style from the voice. Afterwards, I’m drained but exhilarated. There’s a rush to playing through in that way, although I’m not altogether convinced that it allows enough space for the stark moments of dreadful contemplation and realisation that occur.

It is around this time that I meet the one pianist that I find myself unable to adapt to as quickly as the others. We are clearly coming to this work from very different perspectives and it takes some time before most of the songs will settle into a happy medium between our two visions. Besides our very different ideas of the music, this pianist is suffering from a terrible cold. I can see him fighting off the inevitable cotton-wool brains that come with being so unwell. Putting aside my natural singer’s neurosis about catching other people’s sickness, I feel badly for him and how much of a struggle this must be. I take the simplest approach of any run yet – no surprises, clear direction, settled and steady delivery. It’s a solid sing through but lacks the feeling of exploration and discovery that I’ve enjoyed with many others, and highlights for me how much is lacking when compromises have to be made.

The pianists I work with who are old friends bring another dimension to my response to this cycle. The relationship that already exists between us comes through every time and these runs show me how the real life partnership can colour an interpretation, with as many variations possible as there are relationships. One friend is around my age, with a dry sense of humour, and a
sharp intellect. Our friendship is a meeting of humours and minds – we make each other laugh and enjoy getting our teeth into a good debate. The Winterreise we create together is as much a meeting of humours and minds as our friendship. This wanderer is analytical, his sense of irony is heightened, and his journey is one that is more an acceptance of the inevitable than anything else. This pianist and I work easily and instinctively together on the same terms as our usual friendship. He is with me and I am with him – its almost as if we’ve debated all the possible choices available, have come to a suitable agreement, and have chosen a road that will work for us both. The rehearsal with the pianist who has known me the longest is another reflection of relationship through music. She’s known me since I was thirteen and we’ve always been close. She’s warm and loving, and ready for anything I might bring to the piece. Her playing almost says, “Oh, I know you. You’ll probably do this.” She’s with me all the way, supporting and nurturing through her instrument, and I’m relaxed and easy. Perhaps a little too easy – this run is comfortable and familiar, and I wonder if we’re lacking some frisson that we’ve lost over years of wonderfully compassionate rapport but that is so vital to the heart of this cycle. I have no trouble at all finding that vital frisson with another pianist I’ve known for years. This is a person who I respect and admire as a musician but with whom I’ve never been close; in fact, our relationship has had its stormy moments. The cycle with her is carefully executed by us both – the pianist through ability and expertise, me because I’m working hard under someone who will give me a cutting critique if I don’t do a good job. There’s a feeling of a cautious truce about this run – one that I think comes largely from me (this pianist is quite oblivious to most nuances of emotion). I’m reluctant to let the pianist in, to allow that process of becoming entwined in one another that makes the best musical partnerships a success, and the result is a jarring feeling that something doesn’t sit well between piano and voice. A similar, but less uncomfortable, disconnect happens when I run the cycle with a former singing teacher of mine who is also an accomplished pianist. We get along very well but our pattern has been set long ago in a student/teacher frame and true collaboration is never achieved. He stops often to tell me how I am feeling in each song, to give me the correct answers to all of the cycles many questions. I learn a lot, of course, but leave without the illumination of making my own discoveries in tandem with an equal partner.
Old friend or new, coach or pianist, every run of Winterreise is followed by an embrace (the one exception being the pianist who had a cold!). It is as if, on some level, we need to remind each other that there is warmth and compassion in the world, a reason to go on living, and a shared achievement behind us, the equal of which few people will experience. Across all the pianists and coaches with whom I rehearse the piece, some common themes emerge. Without exception, every single one of them is pleased to have a chance to play this piece that is such an important part of music history and so important to musicians across generations and all over the world. Every one them also has their own unique and complex relationship with the work – it is something that has grown with them, taught them about music and themselves, and brought a whole world to life in a new way for every musician who has approached it. From the musicians who have lived with this longest, I have a sense that they are passing on a very great gift in sharing their Winterreise worlds with me; those who have spent less time with the work feel like co-conspirators in a plot to discover and discover and discover. We are all of us like children staring at a sky packed with stars – awestruck at the grandeur, dazzled by the brilliance, and deeply moved at the experience of being part of something so much larger than ourselves. Through all of this, I have my performance goal and eventual performance partner in mind. He is on my shoulder at every rehearsal and I carry him with me as I work with all these musicians and weigh up in my mind which approaches I feel most strongly about, how I might work them into my own interpretation, and what that might mean to the interpretation we create together.

That person is Stephen. A concert pianist and one of three supervisors allocated to me for this doctoral course, I have twisted his arm and somehow convinced him to play these programmes with me. It’s a long journey that we’re beginning together as singer and pianist, and with Winterreise we are jumping into the deep end of building an interpretive relationship as performance partners. I’m nervous – he’s very brilliant and I fear that my limited abilities are no match for what he brings to the partnership. His demeanour belies the musician within – he is self-effacing, softly spoken, and pre-emptively apologetic about his mastery of the work. His playing is indescribable; I’ve never heard, much less sung with, anyone like him. We have a good, easy rapport and so I push to get him to play with me, although he does resist and tries to encourage me to sing with one of his graduate students
with whom I have absolutely no chemistry. I know that Stephen and I will work well together — he would, of course, work well with anyone but I need someone I can trust at the piano with me, and I feel I can trust him. Our early work is difficult for me — I’m anxious to do well, and I stumble over many of the vocal hurdles as I build my stamina for this long work. My greatest fear is that he will lose interest and decide that I should find another pianist, and so I push myself as hard as I can to be a singer he might consider it worth his time to play with. However, he is patient and generous to a fault (even after working with me at times when I’m struggling with my depression). We communicate easily, often wordlessly, and I find myself questioning if I have anything to do with this process or if it is merely the product of working with such a great collaborator. By the time we are approaching performance, I can’t imagine going through this process without him at the piano.

More than any of the pianists I’ve worked with, Stephen pours himself into the music when he plays — he is completely invested. For someone with his naturally shy nature, this results in something quite remarkable. There is another Stephen at the piano — I almost want to say that this other Stephen is IN the piano. A character of immense contradiction is drawn out and, for the first time, I meet (or rather hear) a Stephen who is bold and outspoken, who has bite and power and force. With this other Stephen added to his usually gentle and vulnerable spirit, there is no colour he cannot draw out of his instrument. It is astounding. I am in awe of the music happening around me and my voice is supported and held as it has never been at any other time. My voice and I both — Stephen’s talent at the piano is equally matched by his compassion and this journey, so difficult in both music and emotion, is made easier for having him guide me through it.

Winterreise has a rich history of performance and recording that is impossible (and outside the scope of this work) to encapsulate here. For almost two hundred years, the work has inspired singers, pianists, and practitioners from a number of other creative disciplines to take up the wanderer’s winter journey themselves and to share it with audiences all over the world. That the cycle’s message and its music speak to performers from all kinds of artistic disciplines is testament to the universality of its themes and the poignancy of the music that illustrates them. Of all the singers and pianists who have recorded this work, there are some whose
winter journeys have been in my ears as I attempt my own.

To study lieder in depth, particularly this work, is to come in contact with the work of Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau. Primarily known for his interpretations of German lieder, Fischer-Dieskau has recorded more versions of Winterreise than any other singer; four of them with pianist Gerald Moore, who recalls that Fischer-Dieskau “had only to sing one phrase before I knew I was in the presence of a master.” (Moore, 1962, p.161) Moore and Fischer-Dieskau’s collaborative relationship began as the singer was becoming known to worldwide audiences and the pianist was in the later years of his career. Twenty-five years his senior, Moore reads like a man enamoured with, and in awe of, the younger artist. This is evident in the chapter devoted to Fischer-Dieskau in Moore’s memoir Am I Too Loud? (1962). Listening to the two of them making music together is to hear duet partners, perfectly matched and totally in sync with each other. Moore describes his relationship with Fischer-Dieskau in his book on Schubert lieder with the following passage:

In the world of music Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau is pre-eminent among singers with a genius that is expressed in Lieder, opera and more recently in conducting. One of the joys of my life was my partnership with this man; working with him was an inspiration and I am aware that in his company I went deeper than ever before into the heart of these great cycles. So much in Schubert’s art ‘reposes in an understanding between friends’ (Capell): there is everything to be said for rehearsing, for advanced planning but in the final reckoning the presentation or expression must bear no evidence of being thought out, and this is where Fischer-Dieskau is unique for he sings with the freshness, freedom and rapture of new-born experience. He is the supreme Schubert singer of our time. (Moore, 1975, pp. xv-xvi)

Despite his long and well documented performance relationship with Winterreise, Fischer-Dieskau muses that perhaps “such an intimate diary of a human soul” (Fischer-Dieskau, 1976, p.266) should not be offered to an audience at all. In the event that the cycle is being performed, he has these terse words of advice for the singer:

The singer must have no fears about the chilling effect which these songs can have, given the correct interpretation: he must make no concessions to Austrian charm or maudlin sentimentality, and must be prepared to be criticised for his attitude. If these songs only please us, or stir us or frighten us, then we are a long, long way from fully understanding Schubert’s personal statement. (Fischer-Dieskau, 1976, p.267)

In more contemporary recording, few artists are so strongly identified with art song performance; most have careers that span the opera, oratorio, and concert
stages. Young professionals tend to use oratorio performances as a practice ground in hope for large operatic careers that then lead to recital tours as a named, celebrity performer. Male performers, and some women, who do devote time to nurturing a concert career are likely to record Winterreise; it is a cornerstone work in the repertoire of any male concert singer or lieder pianist. The baritone Thomas Quasthoff, has so far recorded Winterreise twice. It is his second recording, with Daniel Barenboim at the piano, that has interested me most and that I have watched a number of times on DVD. The enormous concert hall in which he performs (the Berlin Philharmonie) is an unusual venue for a lieder recital, although Quasthoff is a widely known and beloved German artist. Quasthoff finds a world of expressive power from his voice and his face – he is mesmerising to watch. In the interviews that accompany the performance on the disc, he describes his approach to the cycle:

To me, personally, the colours that permeate the work are very important. In ‘Die Wetterfahne’, for example, there’s this element of fear. And in ‘Der Lindenbaum’ better times are recalled. This has to be intellectually grasped and translated into colours in such a way that it makes sense, even to people who don’t know the cycle. Each song is really a tremendous challenge. If you have a symbiotic understanding of things like colours and emotionality and – just to concentrate on these two components - these are important if the song is to make emotional and intellectual sense. (Quasthoff in Schubert, 1828/2005)

Thomas Hampson, also a baritone, is a singer who has made the analysis and promotion of art song a large part of his career. In his exploration of Winterreise, he examines not only the poetry and music of the cycle itself but also the literature and culture from which the works and its themes have sprung (The Hampson Foundation, 2012). Hampson’s recording, with Wolfgang Sawallisch at the piano, is full of the warmth and sincerity of delivery that have become his trademark. In another recording, made for television in the Schubertsaal of the Vienna Konzerthaus and with pianist Wolfram Rieger, Hampson delivers the cycle almost to himself in room full of empty chairs. Performances on film highlight another aspect of how a performer chooses to bring this cycle to life and extend it to an audience – their interpretive choices in this medium (or somebody’s choices for them) add another aspect to an already dense musical and poetic work. Hampson and Rieger’s empty chairs are similar to Fischer-Dieskau and Brendel’s empty concert hall (without unoccupied seating) but a far cry from Quasthoff’s packed auditorium. Even further removed are those performances on film which are undertaken in costume, with other characters, and in various settings. In these
cases, the new aspect of how the performance is presented is also overlaid with a film-maker’s vision – a third collaborator in a piece which is most often a duet (all recordings Schubert, 1828).

Brigitte Fassbaender performs in one of the most well-known filmed versions of this cycle (Weigl, 1995/R 1999) – an elaborately designed and conceived interpretation which juxtaposes Fassbaender as a nun in an attic, surrounded by various dancers, with the silently acted out story of a love triangle and a young girl dying during a carriage ride. Women very rarely perform Winterreise – for every recording of this cycle by a female singer, there are several by men. The movement of art song performance from the salon to the concert stage in the nineteenth century sometimes made it prohibitive for women to perform the music that was equally their own in private settings. In fact, the first public performance of Schumann’s Frauenliebe und –leben (Women’s Love and Life) was given by a man (Tunbridge, 2010, p.53). Women soon took to the stage more easily and began to perform works across the spectrum of song, whether narrated by male or female protagonists. However, another change in attitude was soon to come:

Interestingly, the establishment of recording coincided with – and perhaps even contributed to – a more conservative attitude to gender-appropriate performance. Women had sung songs from ‘male’ cycles such as Winterreise and Dichterliebe throughout the nineteenth and for most of the first half of the twentieth century without provoking comment. Elena Gerhardt, Emmi Leisner, Elisabeth Schumann, Lotte Lehmann, and Marian Anderson all had songs from the cycles in their repertoire. The question of verisimilitude occasionally came up, but the more significant issue seems to have been whether the songs suited their registers and where their voices sat in relation to the piano accompaniment. … Since the Second World War, though, a woman singing a ‘male’ cycle seems to have become a remarkable, even a transgressive act. (Tunbridge, 2010, p.55)

Perhaps modern women feel the need to go to extra interpretive lengths (as in Fassbaender’s film) to prove that they have a place singing this music. In my experience, the first question many people have on hearing that I am planning to perform Winterreise, is why I would choose to sing a work that is meant for a man. The French contralto, Nathalie Stutzmann, being interviewed about her 2003 recording of Winterreise with Inger Södergren, makes the following point about artists, their interpretive choices and their reasons for attempting a work of this magnitude: “The only thing that counts is to have something to say. To efface oneself totally behind the music is, of course quite a utopic dream but we can serve it by simply being sincere.” (Stutzmann, 2004). Although she is not referring to gender in this instance, her comment makes a valid addition to the
discussion on whether a woman ought to sing a work originally written for a male voice. In my own case, I feel certain that I have something to say and that I might be able to say it with some sincerity.

**Performance Inspiration**

In early 2013 I am heading for my first performance of Winterreise. I’m nervous but Stephen assures me that, as this work is an Everest that may take a lifetime to climb, I need only make it to base camp this first time. It’s a comforting analogy, especially as I am accustomed to putting so much pressure on myself – nothing is ever good enough if it is not the absolute summit. After the summer at home in New Zealand (a place for which I am almost always homesick), I’m surprised to find that I’m glad to be back in Australia and excited to be approaching this performance. I’m especially glad to see Stephen again and to get back to work with my voice teacher; Lisa – with some good lessons and rehearsals I’m sure I’ll feel more confident about what’s coming up. I have a map in my mind of how I will prepare, beginning with a complete run with both Stephen and Lisa.

I’m not at all prepared for how badly that session goes – Stephen will later tell me that the whole idea was doomed from the start. I’m suddenly faced with two very different directives in the one space. On the one hand, I’m looking to Lisa to see how I’m doing, what needs to be altered, where I’ve missed things that we’ve worked on. On the other, I’m trying to be completely in the moment with Stephen and to recreate that wonderful feeling when the two of us have been totally consumed by the same focus and on the same goal of interpretation and creation. It is a disaster. I feel like a lighthouse, turning to one focus and then the other but never really illuminating either field for any length of time. My stress builds, I begin to inwardly collapse, and I can only pray that I will make it to the end of the piece without stopping. Afterward, I am totally drained and go home in despair that it’s all wrong, I’m not ready, and the whole endeavour is completely foolish. I see Stephen the next day, after a mostly sleepless night, and can hardly string coherent sentences together. This is the last I will see of him for some time – we will rehearse again in the two weeks leading up to the performance. In the meantime, I have plans to run the cycle with some more pianists and coaches, and I have a mountain of organisational details that require my attention. This is where things go from bad to worse. None of the plans I have made seem able to
come to fruition and I’m left making last minute changes and reworking my vision of how I had thought I would present this work. In this, I am almost entirely alone. My supervisors are away and my long suffering wife is consumed with all the work involved in our recent move to Brisbane. I feel I’m fighting alone in a corner for this little performance to happen, although I’m struggling to find the faith in myself and my abilities that I need to be able to make it through.

Stephen’s return is a welcome relief. We’re rehearsing on our own again and I can focus on one goal. As we approach the performance and the time comes for me to turn away and practice singing to my invisible audience, I find it surprisingly difficult to leave Stephen behind me and face the outside world. I begin to think about how it might feel to be sharing this journey with a group of people and to be outside the safety of rehearsing with him. I can’t really imagine how it will be – I’ve never enjoyed pretending that an empty room might one day contain an audience, and the spontaneity of a performance context can’t be pre-created in rehearsal. Still, things are prepared and I’m feeling as ready as I suppose is possible. Stephen’s “base camp” idea keeps me calm when I become anxious about how things might go and I begin to think that it might be possible to just make it that far.

Looking back now, I don’t remember much detail. Stephen is with me, as always. It’s as if he has his hand on my back – I almost feel it when I breathe. My heart is pounding at the end of ‘Auf dem Flusse’ (one of the songs that I find most difficult emotionally) and he instinctively gives me space before ‘Rückblick’ to slow my pulse down. The end of ‘Irrlicht’, where I’ve told him to write ‘send good vibes’ on his score, goes well and I take it as a sign that the vibes were sent and things are going well. Just before ‘Die Post’ our eyes meet for a moment and for that second it seems that it’s just us again, in a rehearsal studio, and my breath moves more freely as we head into the second half. I can hear a few mistakes in my vocal line, a few moments of lost quality or unsupported notes, but mostly I’m not thinking about the singing. All of that thinking has been done. The only thing in my mind is this heartbreaking journey, the soundworld that I’m absorbed in, and my performance partner at the piano. In the background, I’m vaguely aware of my imagination spinning through all the things I’ve read and thought about this cycle – images, recollections, even odd words flash by somewhere in the back of my
mind like cars going past outside a house. The air-conditioning has been turned off (for the sake of recording) and the room is becoming very hot. I’m briefly aware of audience members fanning themselves and sweat dripping down my neck, but there’s no time to settle on that. As the journey winds further and further downward, I feel more and more detached from myself; Stephen seems further away and my voice is coming from somewhere but I’m not sure who’s making it happen. A mistake jolts me back into focus and I realise we’re very nearly at the end. After the last chord has settled, I feel my last ounce of energy and focus dissipate, and I look to Stephen to see if I did actually make it to Winterreise base camp.

Performers from other recital-like disciplines have inspired and educated me along my own journey of interpretation with this cycle. Performers whose work is raw, intimate, and emotional (whatever their discipline) offer examples of how the heavy themes and unsettling concepts of this work can be delivered with honesty, vulnerability, and heartfelt conviction. Eleanor Roosevelt is often credited with the quote “What is to give light must endure the burning”, and these artists encapsulate that idea which seems to me the essence of entering into a performance of a work like Winterreise. These performers build on Stutzmann’s earlier point by not only having something to say, but something to say that comes from directly within themselves and often from the most fragile of inner places.

The world of stand up comedy may be a surprising place to find inspiration for a work so wrapped in depression, despair, and suicidal ideation. However, comedy and tragedy have always bled into one another and the grey area between the two is a place where many artists find their creative spark. Most notably in the tragic works of Shakespeare, the jester or fool has the privilege and responsibility to speak the truth that most others dare not face, and the same is true today. Comedian Simon Amstell points out that stand-up is “an opportunity to tell the truth. It’s a place you can say whatever you want” (Amstell in BBC One, 2011). In revealing their own shortcomings, difficulties, and disappointments as part of their creative output, comedians also encourage us to examine our own lives and give us the courage to face the things we fear the most and against which “a working sense of humour may be our last, best defense” (Livingston, 2012, p.xix). Winterreise’s emotionally scattered and damaged wanderer has reflections in the
work of comedians such as Amstell and Woody Allen. The latter is a performer whose work regularly revisits philosophical themes, particularly death and longing. He acknowledges being drawn to “issues of what life is about and why we’re here and why it’s so painful and relationships between the human being and his existence and human loneliness – that never gets resolved and so it’s of constant interest to me” (Allen in Gordon, 2012). However, he feels his abilities lie in comedy and so he tackles these subjects from that vantage point, finding ways in which to face difficult realities with a wry smile.

People are faced in life with choosing between reality and fantasy, and it’s very pleasant to choose fantasy but that way lies madness and you’re forced, finally, to choose reality, and reality always disappoints, always hurts you. (Allen in Gordon, 2012)

Amstell’s work in stand-up comedy follows similar themes and he credits Woody Allen for providing a career path: “I don’t know what the precedent is other than him for being able to be an insecure, anxious person on the stage” (BBC One, 2011). His own work in stand-up is built around mining his insecurities, his troubles, and his heartbreaks for material that will connect him to the audience. In his experience, “the truth is what connects and the truth is usually what’s funny” (Amstell in BBC One, 2011). Amstell’s truth stems from his insecurity, and from deep, genuine emotion. His stand-up show Do Nothing (Hewett, MacLeod, & Parker, 2010) shares a portrait of a deeply troubled and uncertain young man with his audience. He is a performer who values his vulnerability as a sign of his humanity and, as such, a way to reach out from the stage to make a real connection with people; “I think insecurity’s very important. I think without it, there’s no human being there.” (BBC One, 2011)

The cabaret style of French popular song in the middle of the twentieth century often contained themes of bitter experience and the desperation of the human condition. The delivery of these themes (explored in depth in the poetry of Winterreise) seems to be at its most affecting when drawn from an energy that conveys a connection to the performers’ own sense of themselves. Two of the most well known exponents of this cabaret style were Jacques Brel and Edith Piaf - both performers who became known for their ability to move audiences with their direct style of delivery that seemed to come straight from the soul. Without the classical singer’s concerns for constant beauty of tone, these performers were free to make use of voices full of raw emotion to seemingly expose themselves
entirely to their audiences. In a farewell performance, recorded in Paris in 1966 (Marouani, 1966). Brel sings the heart-breaking ballad *Ne me quitte pas* (Do not leave me) soaked in sweat, seemingly almost on the verge of tears, and from time to time falling into spoken voice during the repeated pleas for his lover to stay. In film footage of Piaf’s performances, the diminutive singer barely moves, save for a handful of standard arm movements to which she returns when she requires emphasis. For the most part, her songs are delivered, hands by her sides, straight out into the auditorium without added movement to distract from the message she seems to insist must take full focus. Her hit *Je ne regrette rien* (EdithPiaf, 2011) became synonymous with the way she lived her life, and to see her perform this song is to be told, in no uncertain terms how she feels about the world.

*As I write this in April 2013, Winterreise has become almost a part of my blood, my DNA. I read somewhere that you have to be haunted by this cycle to be able to sing it; I can’t think of a better description of how it has been for me to live with this work. There is so much of my own lived experience in this cycle and so many of my own thoughts and feelings appear in the words of the wanderer. This past year has been one in which I’ve often been reminded of how tenuous the bond truly is between myself and the balanced mental and emotional health that I make an effort to reconnect with every day. When the wall came down that separates me from that world in which the wanderer ends up I was transformed and the replacement seems to be made of a transparent film that tears easily and through which I can still see the darker paths of my own inner landscape. Living with this cycle has been transformative again – somehow I’ve expanded and gone inward at the same time. My own inner journey with this cycle has been a haunting, contemplative, and heartbreaking experience. At the same time, I’ve discovered an outer world of intimate and intense collaboration that perhaps only a very few musical experiences can deliver. And, really, my journey with this cycle has only just begun.*
CHAPTER 2: BRINGING DEATH TO LIFE

Mahler Kindertotenlieder / Mussorgsky Songs and Dances of Death

I shall die in order to live.
Rise again, yes, rise again,
Will you, my heart, in an instant!
That for which you suffered,
To God will it lead you!

(Gustav Mahler – From Symphony #2, “Resurrection”)

Following on from the oblique and referential treatment of death in early Romantic repertoire, these later 19th-century works — Kindertotenlieder and Songs and Dances of Death — represent a shift to a more direct and declamatory style of engagement. In both, death and grief are more openly referred to and directly characterised. Where Winterreise is haunting and enveloping, these works have a visceral immediacy that is both violently shocking and deeply philosophical. In Kindertotenlieder the performers present five portraits of a parent’s grief at the loss of a child. By turns dreamily detached and full of wild, righteous indignation, this cycle demands that the singer find within themself five unique and authentic presentations of the worst tragedy that can befall a parent.

Mussorgsky’s cycle Songs and Dances of Death gives Death a character and an almost human face as it comes to claim those who belong in its realm. Each of Death’s four encounters with humanity present very different scenarios – the loss of a child, the demise of a sick young woman, the oblivion of a frozen drunk, and the mass slaughter of troops in battle. Singer and pianist must come together in these works to find the most effective way in which to communicate each small world of grief and death. The transformational nature of each of these vignettes is apparent in the experiences of those crossing over and those left grieving.

Context

After the performance of Winterreise and some time spent writing, I approach the next recital programme with a mixture of excitement and anxiety. The cycles on this programme are extremely beautiful but very confronting. I know that, musically, it will be a journey of relearning (I’ve sung the Mahler before, but need
to be sure there are no old bad habits), technical challenge (the final Mussorgsky is a particularly big sing), and collaborative modification as Stephen engages with one cycle that was not written for piano and another that, although originally conceived for piano, is most famous for its orchestral versions and whose composer had always imagined it orchestrated (although he never managed the task in his lifetime). Emotionally, it is bound to be a minefield. After our experiences working together to prepare Winterreise, it is my hope that Stephen and I can go even deeper together this time and explore the experiences behind these cycles so that we can create a truly moving and memorable experience for our next audience. I’m not blind to the difficulties that may lie ahead here – it means asking a father to confront the worst tragedy a parent can face, discussing life and death in depth with raw honesty (something that rarely happens between close friends let alone doctoral candidate and supervisor), and being attuned enough to each other to be able to navigate these worlds of sound and emotion as one coherent unit. All of this needs to happen over a much shorter timeframe than before – where we had a year to prepare Winterreise, this programme needs to come together over a matter of months, with some long breaks from rehearsing together thrown in. I hope that we can compress what has so far been an emotionally fulfilling and musically rewarding process into the shorter timespan and that the easy trust and closeness we developed over the past year will support us through this coming period, which is bound to be full of challenge.

The poet Friedrich Rückert explored the field of parental grief in an incredible collection of 425 poems written after the loss of two of his children, Luise and Ernst. Of the six children in the family, five became ill during a scarlet fever epidemic, and Luise and Ernst were taken from their parents only weeks apart (31 December 1833, and 16 January 1834, respectively). Possibly never intended for publication (they were only published posthumously), these poems are an extraordinary documentation of a man’s struggle to come to terms with the loss of two of the most precious beings in his life. Although written almost a century ago, they resonate today with the common pain shared by so many grieving parents and, in the enormity of their scope, cover the many different states of mind that the grieving may encounter as they journey forward without their loved ones.

In many poems the anguish is intensely expressed – especially those written after the death of Luise but before the death of Ernst, who in addition suffered extremely from an inflammation of the brain which ultimately caused his death. In other poems the feelings
are less intense, the poet able to contemplate his situation at a more philosophical distance. (Russell, 1991, p.33)

While it is true that the loss of children was something far less unexpected than in current times, the idea that children’s value to their parents was anything less than it is today is patently untrue. Rückert’s poems share with us that the painful grief of losing a child has changed very little throughout the ages, and writers back as far as Shakespeare tell us the same thing (Bryson, 2010, p.432).

Mahler himself lost a child – his daughter Maria Anna died of scarlet fever in 1907. He had, however, begun composing the music to his selections from Rückert’s Kindertotenlieder in 1901 (before even being married, let alone becoming a parent) and completed them in 1904, having been married and had two children in the intervening years. The motivation behind the decision to set these poems to music is unknown. His wife, Alma, recalls being horrified at the thought of her husband (and father to her children) working on these pieces:

I found this incomprehensible. I can understand setting such frightful words to music if one had no children, or had lost those one had. Moreover, Friedrich Rückert did not write these harrowing elegies solely out of his imagination: they were dictated by the cruellest loss of his whole life. What I cannot understand is bewailing the deaths of children, who were in the best of health and spirits, hardly an hour after having kissed and fondled them. I exclaimed at the time: ‘For heaven’s sake, don’t tempt Providence!’ (Mahler, 1946/R1968, p.70)

Mahler himself is said to have been concerned about the possibly prophetic nature of these compositions and to have been “sorry for the world which would one day have to hear them, so dreadfully sad was their content” (Bauer-Lechner, quoted in Russell, 1991, pp.3-4). Some commentators have sought to link Mahler’s attraction to these poems to the deaths of two of his brothers (in particular, his brother Ernst whose name is shared by one of Rückert’s lost children) or his own close brush with death in February 1901 – still others argue that the Kindertotenlieder songs are exercises not in emotional but artistic output (Russell, 1991, pp.4-5). Russell explains that this is unlikely to be the case: “For Mahler as for most Romantic composers the act of composing was always more than just an ‘artistic challenge’: it was also a passionate exploration of personal inner experience” (1991, p.4). Either way, we are lucky to have the songs at all; Mahler is quoted as saying to a friend that “I put myself in the situation that a child of mine had died. When I really lost my daughter, I could not have written these songs anymore.” (Kravitt, 1978, p.335)

We should also count ourselves lucky to have Mussorgsky’s Songs and Dances of
Death. Written between 1875 and 1877, they were composed only four years before he died and during a time in which he was suffering from the extreme alcoholism that would eventually lead to his death. The poetry and music of this cycle are inextricably linked; the poet (Arseny Golenishchev-Kutuzov) and composer were extremely close and encouraged each other in their creative output. Whether they were actually lovers is something that has been discussed among historians but is not known for certain. The various pointers towards Mussorgsky’s possible homosexuality are outlined by Richard Taruskin (1993, pp.30-31) but no similar note is made of Golenishchev-Kutuzov’s sexuality. In fact, the friendship came to an acrimonious (but not final) end when the poet abandoned his life with the composer to get married. The pain of the loss of his, at the very least, extremely dear friend may even have been Mussorgsky’s downfall. Taruskin writes of this loss of Golenishchev-Kutuzov to marriage: “If there was an incident that precipitated Musorgsky’s ruinous heavy drinking, this was surely it.” (1993, p.14) Further complications exist in trying to build up an image of Mussorgsky’s emotional and creative instincts around the composition of this work (and most others) in that his memory has been largely preserved in contradictory writings by Golenishchev-Kutuzov and one other commentator, his friend and biographer, Stasov. The two men tolerated each other while Mussorgsky was alive, but eventually fell out and their writings on the composer differ dramatically (Taruskin, 1993, pp.13-31). Add to that, the passing years that have included a Soviet government that went to extreme measures to redraw Russia’s historical figures (including artists) in a way that would support the regime, and Mussorgsky becomes almost as ethereal as the character of Death in these songs.

The songs themselves give us four portraits of ways in which Russian people at the time might encounter Death as well as an interesting window into the Russian collective view and fear of this frequent visitor to human homes and lives. In his doctoral dissertation on the Songs and Dances of Death, Peter Alan Barton notes the importance of the fact that the cycle was originally titled only with the pronoun “She”. (Death is a feminine noun in the Russian language)

Widespread in Russian folk culture is a belief in naklikanie, the bringing forth of something merely by speaking its name; to speak the name Death, therefore, is to invite her in, to summon her into existence. But in an unnerving logic, to use only the pronoun in the title was to increase Death’s power, for the entire cycle then unfolded under a dark feeling of taboo. Mussorgsky was a credible student of the occult, in both its European
and its local Russian expression. He knew that in the Russian folk mind the act of naming was related not only to incarnation but also to the act of drawing pictures. (Barton, 2011, p.15)

Even without the pronoun as title, the naming of Death remains a pivotal moment in each song; one that marks the division between the terrifying fears of the human narrator and the ease, grace, and poise of Death as she goes about her work. Barton’s final point that naming creates a picture of a thing speaks much to what we know of Mussorgsky through his compositional output. Mussorgsky musically paints vivid pictures of the moments described in these songs much as he does of the characters and context in his celebrated opera Boris Godunov and, more literally, in his work Pictures at an Exhibition. In a curious coincidence, the illustrators of Disney’s 1940 film of classical music combined with the company’s trademark animation, Fantasia, chose Mussorgsky’s Night on Bald Mountain as one of the nine pieces they wanted to bring to life on the screen. Perhaps Mussorgsky’s lasting legacy to us all is the vivid pictures he is able to conjure up in our imaginations.

The Thematic Landscape
Are they with us, the dead? I bear an uncanny resemblance to my Māori grandmother who died when I was only four years old (in all but skin colour) which frightens my aunts, especially the youngest of them who visibly shudders when I enter her house. To her, it is as if her mother has returned through me. My youngest niece is named for a close friend of my sister who passed away in a farming accident. Little Emma is, without doubt, someone you would describe as an “old soul”. She sees right through the layers of complexity that adults often think make them so mysterious, and she reminds us with her ready laugh and certainty of purpose that we should really stop taking ourselves so seriously and get on with what we were put here to do. Is her namesake around in some way, helping her to make sense of the world? There are no ready answers for me when I come to face and try to make sense of the role of the dead in our lives and whether or not they maintain a palpable presence among us. We do, of course, keep them alive in our memories and with our various rituals and commemorations. There are many who will say with absolute certainty that there is nothing at all beyond our physical existence; others will argue just as hard that there are worlds beyond what we know in this life, and that the dead walk with us
throughout our lives, rest easily in paradise, or burn eternally for their worldly failings. It seems to me that certainty is for the fearful and unimaginative – definitely not, as far as I’m concerned, a place that should be inhabited by creative people who are society’s designated dreamers. As far as I can gather, the only way to be certain on this topic, is to be dead.

Growing up in New Zealand and having one Māori and one pakeha (the Māori word for white New Zealanders) side of the family, I have two strong cultural influences on my perspective on this area. One, although largely hijacked by western European Christianity, is earthy and tribal. Tangihanga (grieving rituals similar to funerals) are long drawn out processes full of ritual and symbolism during which the dead are absolutely considered to be among the living (as they are in most of Māori ritual practice). The other, almost entirely drawn from the European Christian tradition, is full of restraint and etiquette – there are no women wailing at pakeha funerals. The emphasis in those situations is more on a carefully organised routine designed to move the dead individual quickly on to be with other dead, whether to an afterlife or not. There is, however, much common ground throughout the human experience; pain and loss, although difficult to experience, are great unifiers and teachers. When a pakeha friend dies after a long illness, the shared funeral experience brings out as much joy as sorrow while mourners support each other through such a sad time. Similarly, at the tangi I have attended, there comes a moment when the guitars come out, happy memories are shared or created, and the connection among the living is made stronger by the mutual loss that brought everybody together.

The major exceptions to this are the loss of a child, young person, or someone who is taken “before their time”. When a longstanding faculty member commits suicide during my time as an under-graduate student in a small music department, the waves of shock are far-reaching and palpable as people struggle to make sense of what has occurred. The loss of children, and the immeasurable grief that accompanies such a loss, is so tragically transformative that it remains a lifelong wound. Those people I have known who have experienced the loss of their children have never fully separated themselves from their suffering. My former parents-in-law who lost their oldest son to suicide; my work colleague whose
baby died in utero; my grandmother whose infant daughter died after only weeks of life; all hold a private pain within themselves that cannot be alleviated by any amount of support or love.

Kindertotenlieder deals with the experience of grief after the loss of a child. Essentially, the universal experience of grief has altered little through time. Whether our loss is small or large, if it is significant to us and our lived experience the unmistakeable pain that strikes at us is grief. Similarly, whether our loss is ours alone or is experienced by many as a loss to society or humanity, the pain that we share or suffer beneath in isolation is grief. It is a constant companion to the human experience – the dark twin to the joy of desire and its fulfillment. What has changed over the years is our understanding of the process of grief. One of the major contributors to that understanding is Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, whose groundbreaking work with dying patients and the people who tend to them led to the development of her now famous five stages of grief: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance (Kübler-Ross, 1969). In a later work, first published six years after the worldwide acceptance of her research, she notes that her stages “apply equally to any significant change (e.g. retirement, moving to a new city, changing jobs, divorce) in a person’s life, and change is a regular occurrence in human existence.” (Kübler-Ross, 1986) While progression through all of these stages to a state of relative peace is uncertain and the progress unique to each individual, Kübler-Ross’ stages have become a part of the vernacular around loss and grief, allowing us to better understand one another in our pain and inspiring many to follow in her footsteps and continue to explore her field.

One aspect of the experience of loss and grief that comes with our engagement with death is the possibility of an immortal soul, or life after death. The proliferation of research into near-death experiences has revealed phenomena whose commonality may or may not be attributed to human socialisation and our expectations of what lies beyond death. In any case, the debate about the existence of an immortal soul continues across various cultures, religions, and societies, and largely boils down to a belief or otherwise in a higher spiritual power. Kübler-Ross certainly believes and shares her hope for the future in her book on working with dying children.
With further research and further publications, more and more people will know rather than believe that our physical body is truly only the cocoon, the outer shell of the human being. Our inner, true self, the “butterfly” is immortal and indestructible and is freed at the moment we call death. (Kübler-Ross, 1983, p. 220)

Many of our rituals around death are attempts to engage with the spiritual nature of our grief, of the loved one who has been lost, and of the wider cosmos as we see it. The increasingly secular nature of modern society means that we have lost many of these rituals as people move away from wanting to identify with a strict set of beliefs. Donald Heinz laments this loss of ritual (whether religious or otherwise) which once brought relief to many in their grief.

As rituals negotiate the human passage through the world, the world passes through our humanity. There are powerful impediments to ritual in the modern age… but the evolution of rituals and of culture and of our humanity can proceed together. From the pregnant liminality of death, new rituals, new cultural meanings, new life can be born. A fully ritualized death of our own becomes our bequest to the next generation. (1999, p. xx)

Mussorgsky’s *Songs and Dances of Death* largely focus not on the experience of those left behind but on those transitioning from life to death. Literature around death and grief often offers the idea that we have become a death-denying society in the modern age as we seek to distance ourselves from the taint of death’s touch. Phillipe Ariès refers to the “invisible death” (1981, p. 611), his name for our current model of death in society which has resulted from a number of cultural and societal movements.

One of these movements has unified mass society against death. More precisely, it has led society to be ashamed of death, more ashamed than afraid, to behave as if death did not exist. If the sense of the other, which is a form of the sense of the self taken to its logical conclusion, is the first cause of the present state of death, then shame – and the resulting taboo – is the second. (1981, p.613)

Whether this attitude toward death has changed since the publication of Ariès’ book is uncertain and, he would argue, unlikely. Ariès notes that “changes in man’s attitude toward death either take place very slowly or else occur between long periods of immobility” (1981, p.xvi). These changes can be hard to notice as they occur because they “span several generations and thus exceed the capacity of the collective memory.” (1981, p.xvi) His expansive history of the western European attitude toward death takes the reader from the Middle Ages when death was a frequent and expected visitor to the home, to the present day when death’s occurrence has become corporatised, outsourced, medicalised, and shamefully unacknowledged. While many generalities span the ages of society, the particulars (especially since the onset of World War I) have been lost to us and our traditional
relationship with death has been so obliterated from our culture that it is hard for us to imagine or understand it. The ancient attitude in which death is close and familiar yet diminished and desensitized is too different from our own view, in which it is so terrifying that we no longer dare say its name. (1981, p.28)

Traditional cultures around the world all have their own mysteries around birth, death, rebirth, and the immortality of the soul that serve didactically as initiation into the very tangible and certain experience of death, either one’s own or another’s. The various rites and mythologies surrounding death often have similar themes across cultures and societies as they strike at the common core of the lived human experience. We will watch others die and, eventually, come to face death ourselves. In his exploration of death’s many mystical representations around the world, Stanislav Grof suggests that archetypal ideas and images of death from various world cultures are gathered in the collective human unconscious and “seem to reside in the psyche of modern Westerners” (2010, p.54). As Western society seeks for a new model of death, many people are looking to cultures around the world (both ancient and modern) for answers and examples. Grof discusses the hands-on, experiential nature of ancient religions (including ancient forms of Christianity) as something that has been lost from modern life but which may inadvertently be rediscovered in near-death experience.

In a mystical experience of this type, we have a sense of leaving ordinary reality where space has three dimensions and time is linear. We enter a metaphysical, transcendent realm where these categories no longer apply. In this state, infinity and eternity become experiential realities. The numinous quality of this state has nothing to do with previous religious beliefs but rather reflects a direct apprehension of the divine nature of reality. (2010, p.163)

Grof references the research of Elisabeth Kübler-Ross and Raymond Moody in the fields of death, dying, and near-death experience, noting that “the messages from this experience seemed to be the understanding that the most important values in human life were learning to love other people and acquiring higher knowledge.” (2010, p.165) Perhaps, as we broaden our acceptance of what is possible and which cultures might give us guidance toward a less volatile relationship with death, we will discover that our ancient understanding of death and its transformative powers is something that will make us more compassionate and loving people in our day to day lives and lead us to move on to a new societal model of death that embraces everything that experience has to offer without fear.
Characterising Death & Grief

It is December, 2006. I have been home for a week (having moved back to New Zealand from Europe to pursue a blossoming relationship) when the phone call comes. My new partner, Sue, and I are in Auckland to attend a funeral in her extended family. The breast care clinic at Dunedin hospital are following up with Sue after her recent mammogram. They assure her that there may be nothing to worry about but that they would like to see her again as there are some abnormalities in her results. We know that there may still be nothing wrong but something tells us that a new and terrible journey has begun. Death has appeared and is insinuating itself in our lives. The irony of attending a funeral on the same day we receive this call is not lost on us. Every aspect of the funeral ritual becomes suddenly very close and full of potential personal implications. We are farewelling someone and projecting a similar ritual of our own grief and loss. We tell nobody of our news – today is not the day to be giving grieving people any further cause for sorrow or concern. Death seems to have two presences here; one fully realised and complete in its purpose, the other a mere shadow, brought more to life by our worries and our shock than by anything concrete.

Back home, in Dunedin, after further tests, we face the news that we most feared – Sue has cancer. We are lucky that it appears to be operable and the mechanism of public health swings into motion as appointments are confirmed, an operation date scheduled, and preparations made for the journey ahead, however long or short it may be. From a relatively carefree 26 year old, I am thrust suddenly into the role of caregiver, supporter, and questioner of all things medical as my partner learns what it is to become reliant on doctors and other medical staff for the answer to the question, “How am I?”. In the month that we have to prepare for her operation, I feel like I age decades. Somebody who is very sick is depending on me and while I watch Death’s shadow become more of a palpable presence in her life, I feel it in my own, as it threatens to take away someone so precious to me that I gave up a life half a world away to be with her. We don’t have an easy run through the first surgery – her body nearly gives up on her first night due to the pressures of the anaesthetic and there are complications with her operation that require her to have a second procedure only days later. When the nurses tell me that they nearly lost her overnight, my heart catches in my chest and it truly feels as if someone is holding it tight and restricting its beats.
She makes it through – we make it through – and by the middle of the year, despite recurrent pain problems and the difficulties associated with radiation treatment, we are almost congratulating ourselves on having stared Death in the face and come back relatively unscathed. But Death has other plans. Sue begins to get sick - very sick - and we have no idea why. Her surgical wound is inflamed and sore and eventually the pain and sickness become too much and I rush her into the emergency room late one night. In a university town on a Friday night, most emergency services are dealing with alcohol-related accidents and illness. We are shunted off to a distant corridor with the elderly, other severe long-term illness cases, and a variety of people who will keep and I watch, frustrated, as stomach pumps and various breaks and wounds of drunk students take precedence over us all. Sue weakens and pales, and Death sits with us in the corridor welcoming us back into its domain. When they finally see her, six hours later, she is so sick that the terrified staff pump her with drugs without thinking to test first for what might be going on – it is only later that we discover that this oversight only serves to worsen her condition. She is startlingly close to death, much closer than ever, and once she is transferred to a ward it is to a high intensity unit with admission only allowed under strict rules of hygiene and dress. The medical staff who attend her in masks, goggles, and plastic overclothes are terrifying to me – she is too sick to take much of it in. Death is closer to her than I am now – her constant companion and bedside confidante. When she begins to recover, she tells me of seeing a long hallway down which she knew she had only to walk and all the pain and illness would be over; she begins to walk down and sees people waiting at the other end but calls herself back at the last moment to continue the life she has only just begun with me.

Her recovery is long and slow – Death will not give her up easily and just as she pulls out of the very last of the pain and the drugs (almost a year later), I begin to go under with mental health problems and meet a new Death with a siren song that is made just for me. Years later, when Sue goes into hospital for a routine operation, we discover that the sickness that nearly killed her will never actually leave her body at all. Any time she is treated in a hospital, for anything, she will have to be isolated and treated with particular care and she will always have to be aware of just how sick she is feeling, as her immune system will always be
compromised. It is as though Death is biding its time, maintaining a tiny presence in a body that was once so close to its grasp and was claimed by good fortune and good health. For now...

Death and its inevitable companion, grief, are brought into stark relief in these songs of Mahler and Mussorgsky. After the fantasies and glorification of death in Winterreise, these cycles drive home the realities of dying and of losing those that we love the most. The wanderer’s posturing gives way to natural, visceral reactions as parents struggle to come to terms with losing their children, and as various people are taken by a Death character in a quasi-human form. These cycles are full of the stories we tell ourselves and each other to make sense of the world. Honest effort is made to come to terms with the reality of life and death rather than abandoning it and losing our sense of who we are.

The grief experience has motivated many people to write their stories and to give the often quiet and solitary oblivion of the grieving parent, spouse, sibling (or other loved one left behind) many faces and voices. The suffering they describe is both universal and uniquely related to the individual experience and context of each writer. What comes through every time, without fail, is the courage that it takes to put these terrifying emotions and events into words so that others might find healing from them. Often these memoirs are written as the authors attempt to heal themselves or rediscover their loved ones. As Isabel Allende sat at the bedside of her daughter who had fallen into a coma, she began to document what would be a seven-year journey (culminating in her daughter Paula’s death).

I don’t know how to reach you; I call and call but your name is lost in the nooks and crannies of this hospital. My soul is choking in sand. Sadness is a sterile desert. I don’t know how to pray. I cannot string together two thoughts, much less immerse myself in creating a new book. I plunge into these pages in an irrational attempt to overcome my terror. I think that perhaps if I give form to this devastation I shall be able to help you, and myself, and that the meticulous exercise of writing can be our salvation. Eleven years ago I wrote a letter to my grandfather to say goodbye to him in death. On this January 8, 1992, I am writing you, Paula, to bring you back to life. (1995, pp.9-10)

These authors’ attempts to make sense of the new world in which they find themselves stand as beacons of honesty in our society that has a way of sweeping the grieving under the carpet, forcing upon them behaviours they ought to be engaging in so as not to create too much disturbance to the rest of us and so that they might quickly be assimilated back into the everyday world that we all face.
What is not acknowledged by most of us is that these people face an entirely new world in front of them; if we could truly learn from their experiences, we might discover that in fact we are facing the same new world but that our efforts to deny death have pulled a gauze over our vision that prevents us from seeing things as they actually are. In C.S. Lewis’ memoir *A Grief Observed* (1961) he mentions “being an embarrassment to everyone I meet” and wonders if “the bereaved ought to be isolated in special settlements like lepers.” (pp. 22-23). Yet the courage and honesty displayed by those who are able to document their grief contain much wisdom for those of us who are willing to listen to and absorb the messages they have to give us about understanding grief, the bereaved, and ourselves. Joan Didion’s memoir *Blue Nights* (2011), written after she had already composed a previous grief memoir *The Year of Magical Thinking* (2005) on the loss of her husband, works through her grief after losing her only child, her daughter, Quintana. Her writing fluctuates from long distant memories to retelling the narrative of her daughter’s illness and death, to abstract musings on the nature of her present day experience, almost as though all of those experiences exist in a single moment.

Vanish. Pass into nothingness: the Keats line that frightened her. Fade as the blue nights fade, go as the brightness goes. Go back into the blue. I myself placed her ashes in the wall. I myself saw the cathedral doors locked at six. I know what it is I am now experiencing. I know what the frailty is, I know what the fear is. The fear is not for what is lost. What is lost is already in the wall. What is lost is already behind the locked doors. The fear is for what is still to be lost. You may see nothing still to be lost. Yet there is not day in her life on which I do not see her. (p. 188, 2011)

Death as a character (as she appears in the *Songs and Dances of Death*) has a long history of representation in works of art throughout writing, visual art, film, and the various performance arts. From early representations of a skeletal, grim reaper to contemporary appearances in disguise as just another human, Death’s physical, tangible relationship with humanity has been as fascinating to the creative mind as the literal reality of the death experience. One of the most enduring images of Death’s visits to the living has been that of the danse macabre – a visual representation of the “eternal round in which the dead alternate with the living” (Ariès, 1981, p. 116). This vision of the dead, and Death itself, dancing with the
living was originally intended to “remind the viewer both of the uncertainty of the hour of death and of the equality of all people in the face of death” (Ariès, 1981, p.116) and survives today as a recognisable reminder of the often tenuous hold we have on life. As a vehicle for introducing Death personally to an audience, it has the advantage of placing Death in an activity normally engaged in while the living celebrate life. In his novel for young people about a boy raised by the dead, Neil Gaiman uses the danse macabre to introduce Death herself to his readers.

Each of the dancers took a partner, the living with the dead, each to each. Bod reached out his hand and found himself touching fingers with, and gazing into the grey eyes of, the lady in the cobweb dress. She smiled at him.
“Hello, Bod,” she said.
“Hello,” he said, as he danced with her. “I don’t know your name.”
“Names aren’t really important,” she said.
“I love your horse. He’s so big! I never knew horses could be that big.”
“He is gentle enough to bear the mightiest of you away on his broad back, and strong enough for the smallest of you as well.”
“Can I ride him?” asked Bod.

These introductions to Death through the arts essentially still serve the same purpose they always have done, which is to remind us of our mortality and to teach us that we are all the same under the gaze of this eternal friend and nemesis to humankind. In another of Gaiman’s works (the long collection of graphic novels in his Sandman series) Death appears as one of a group of siblings called the Endless. Collectively, they represent humanity’s enduring themes – Destiny, Death, Dream, Destruction, Despair, Desire, and Delirium (who was once Delight) – and Death is depicted fulfilling her duties toward not only humans but anything that lives and dies. This Death is realised as a bright, enthusiastic young woman of the modern age who executes her role with good humour and real compassion for the struggle of those who have lives and must, eventually, die.
The moment of death is often communicated through the eyes of the dying, either through a fictional dying character or in the words of real people as they pass on their own insights into life’s final experience. Well-known people’s final words are often quoted as a representation for what they stood for in life or how they were summing up their lives as they approached death, and the analysis of the death experience from an emotional perspective (rather than a scientific one) is something that speaks to audiences about the ways in which we might approach our own deaths. Leo Tolstoy, as an author obsessed with death and dying, explored the death experience in various writings. In his short story *The Death of Ivan Illyich*, he taps into the human flaw of realising that others must die while struggling to come to terms with having to experience a death of their own.

> Yes, Caesar is mortal and it’s all right for him to die, but not me, Vanya Ivan Illyich, with all my feelings and thoughts – it’s different for me. It can’t be me having to die. That would be too horrible. (Edmonds, R,1960/R 2008, p.193)

But we are not always so afraid to die. Many of the dying who choose to document the end of their lives offer us examples of great strength and courage in the face of something that is so little discussed and for which we are less prepared than we have ever been. Philip Gould’s moving memoir of his journey toward death is one such example of someone at peace with their fate and ready to share the wisdom that comes with that experience.

> Death is usually depicted as a time of decline, of growing irrelevance, as the ending of growth, the cessation of contribution. To some extent those things may be true. But for the dying themselves, like me, there is another dynamic at work: the sheer intensity of death leads us to assess our world in ways we have never done before, each contributing to a kind of pre-death moment of judgement…
> Death is not frightening if you accept it. It is a time for immense change and transformation, a time to fulfil yourself and others, and a chance in a small way to change the world. (Gould, 2012, pp.111-112)

**A Transformational Moment**

*I am a young teenager when our close family friends discover that their child, Claire, has leukaemia. I have known Claire since she was a baby and, even at the young age that I am myself, I realise that this is no ordinary sickness. I see the seriousness in my parents’ reactions and watch the changes that are wrought in Claire’s parents as they begin the series of treatments that are almost certainly only going to prolong her life, not save it. They are friends from our days of living in the remote New Zealand countryside and we begin to see more and more of them and the girls (Claire has a younger sister, Sophie) as Claire’s illness*
progresses. I don’t see or recall much of what is going on. Claire’s physical appearance tells me how sick she is and her parents’ drawn faces communicate the unspeakable pain of what they are going through.

We visit them at home as often as we can and the adults spend long hours in conversations that go far over my head. I spend my time with the girls – Sophie is very small but Claire is old enough to talk to and play games with when she is feeling well. During one holiday there on my own, Claire is suddenly taken seriously ill and needs to be rushed to hospital. Sophie and I are moved to stay with friends while Claire and her parents carry on into town. I have a sudden, brief, and terrifying insight into what life has become for this family. They are racing against time and competing with Death in a battle for a tiny person who sits so weakly on the edge of life’s limits. Sophie is unphased – she has become accustomed to this routine - but I am frightened and in shock and Claire’s mother takes a moment to console me, still really a child myself, before they leave. The night is dark and cold, everything is happening so fast, and tears of desperate confusion and fear are pouring down my cheeks. This, I think, is Death – it sneaks up on you in the night, it is frightening, it turns everything upside down so that even grown ups, those usual reliable sources of calm and control, are frantic and worried.

Claire survives that night and soon, very slowly, I see another kind of Death emerge. Claire is planning her funeral and has made sure that she will be farewelled in a way that fits with who she is in life. She has never stopped making plans while she is living (she would like to be a writer if she gets to grow up) but she has come to terms with what it means to be dying. Sometimes I see the adults talking with her and I realise that she understands them deeply, sees into the world behind their baffling conversations and their outer lives. I am sixteen when we visit her at home for the last time – something we all know to be the case but is spoken under the breath and communicated through glances and embraces. We go into her room, one at a time, to say goodbye. It’s dimly lit and Claire is in bed, propped up on pillows and looking pale. She listens to me saying the same things that I’ve heard the others say – I have no idea what to do other than parrot my elders and follow this ritual procession. She doesn’t say anything, but reaches up
to me and kisses me on the lips; something we never do in my family. The shock of this intimate, moving, and intensely communicative gesture washes over me. She is comforting me, loving me. She seems to know what I would really want to say to her, in my heart of hearts, and she affirms it - thanks me for it - while some small part of what is left of her life force passes from her lips to mine. Claire died at home, at just eleven years old, surrounded by the love of her family and filled with the peace of a life beautifully lived.

Her funeral is held in a church in the nearest large town – the town where I was born. My mother has arranged for me to sing during the service and tells me that I mustn’t cry; it isn’t fair on her parents and it’s important that I do a good job for Claire’s sake. With those orders in my head I do the only thing I can to follow them – I remove myself from the cathartic ritual going on around me and force myself to observe as if untouched. The tiny white coffin, Claire’s grieving family, the songs and readings chosen by this little girl as the things that best represent her when she is no longer here to represent herself – none of them can mean anything to me if I am to do this job. The grief of losing a friend, of witnessing the terrible pain of those left behind, of realising that even the youngest among us can die, remains unexpressed – crouched inside me and gnawing at me – and I silently promise myself that I will never again be forced to sing at a time when it is only normal that I should have no voice.

Kindertotenlieder contains two very different kinds of transformation. The transformation of the lives of the parents left behind (as discussed above) and the transformation of once living children into stars, memories, or beings in eternal rest. The idea (brought out explicitly in song two and alluded to in song four) that children have an enhanced sensitivity toward and awareness of what awaits them beyond life is one that exists in a number of cultures and appears often in children’s literature. When they are writing for children, it seems that adults are sometimes inspired to speak to them without the euphemisms that adults use to describe things that are taboo. Antoine de Saint-Exupéry’s children’s book, The Little Prince (1945) parallels some of the images suggested in Kindertotenlieder as the prince’s death approaches and occurs. In the second song of Mahler’s cycle, the parent describes the children’s attempts to communicate that they were being
called to the ultimate homecoming, just as the prince suggests to his friend that he will soon be leaving:

“I, too, am going back home today…”

Then, sadly –

“It is much farther… It is much more difficult…”

I realized clearly that something extraordinary was happening. I was holding him close in my arms as if he were a little child; and yet it seemed to me that he was rushing toward an abyss from which I could do nothing to restrain him… (p.80)

At the end of the second song, the children’s eyes seem to be telling the parent that they will soon become stars. The prince uses the same analogy to describe his own transformation:

“All men have stars,” he answered, “but they are not the same things for different people. For some, who are travellers, the stars are guides. For others they are no more than little lights in the sky. For others, who are scholars, they are problems. For my businessman they are wealth. But all these stars are silent. You – you alone – will have the stars as no one else has them.”

“What are you trying to say?”

“In one of the stars I shall be living. In one of them I shall be laughing. And so it will be as if all the stars were laughing, when you look at the sky at night… You – only you – will have stars that can laugh!” (p.83)

Although the narrator takes great pains throughout the book to explain to children that grown-ups never truly understand the important things in life, he betrays his own adulthood in the end by fantasising (as the parent does in the fourth song of Kindertotenlieder) that the prince will someday return, and begs the reader, “If this should happen, please comfort me. Send me word that he has come back.” (p.91)

Astrid Lindgren’s children’s novel The Brother’s Lionheart (1973) deals with the transformation of death as its core subject as brothers Rusky and Jonathan die not once, but twice; first leaving this world for the paradise of Nangiyala, and then dying in that world and going on to the next paradise of Nangilima. In her description of Jonathan’s first death after a housefire (Rusky follows soon after, due to illness), her words mirror the bleak emotion of the first, and hopeful fantasy of the fourth, songs of Kindertotenlieder:

Everything is almost like it was before. And everything, absolutely everything, is not like it was before. No one sits with me and tells me things in the evenings. I’m so lonely that it hurts inside me and all I can do is to lie and whisper to myself the words that Jonathan said just before he died; that moment when we were lying on the ground after we had jumped. He was lying face down, of course, but someone turned him over and I saw his face. A little blood was running out of the corner of his mouth and he could hardly speak. But it was as if he were trying to smile all the same, and he managed a few words. ‘Don’t cry, Rusky. We’ll meet in Nangiyala.’ (p.11)
The fantasy of a transformation that is both beautiful and leads to an improvement on the first life, is something that both song cycles share and that writings ranging from religious myths to children’s stories have used in an effort to elucidate both the meaning of this life and what may lie ahead in the next. In her story for very young children, *The Velveteen Rabbit* (1922), Margery Williams describes a transformation from one life to another that occurs to a toy rabbit that is about to be burned in a bonfire along with all the other belongings of a boy who has recently had scarlet fever:

He thought of those long sunlit hours in the garden – how happy they were – and a great sadness came over him. He seemed to see them all pass before him, each more beautiful than the other… He thought of the Skin horse, so wise and gentle, and all that he had told him. Of what use was it to be loved and lose one’s beauty and become Real if it all ended like this? And a tear, a real tear trickled down his little shabby velvet nose and fell to the ground.

And then a strange thing happened. For where the tear had fallen a flower grew out of the ground… And presently the blossom opened, and out of it there stepped a fairy… ‘I am the nursery magic Fairy,’ she said. ‘I take care of all the playthings that the children have loved. When they are old and worn out and the children don’t need them any more, then I come and take them away with me and turn them into Real.’

‘Wasn’t I Real before?’ asked the little Rabbit.

‘You were Real to the Boy,’ the Fairy said, ‘because he loved you. Now you shall be Real to everyone.’

And she held the little Rabbit close in her arms and flew with him into the wood… In the open glade between the tree-trunks the wild rabbits danced with their shadows on the velvet grass…

‘I’ve brought you a new playfellow,’ the Fairy said. ‘You must be very kind to him and teach him all he needs to know in Rabbitland, for he is going to live with you for ever and ever!’ (pp.33-35)

Although the first adult observation might be that wild rabbits are doomed to the same fate as the rest of us, the more interesting message here is the parallel between human life and death and the rabbit’s development and transformation. He has already become “Real” to his boy through being loved (he has lived a life that is filled with meaningful connection), has had his life flash before his eyes (a common anecdote from human near-death experiences) and he will now become “Real to everyone” (improved beyond the realness of his first life) after being transformed by the Fairy (Death) and taken to live with other rabbits in “Rabbitland” (an allegory for paradise) for ever and ever.

Mussorgsky’s Death never describes what might be waiting beyond the transformative moment (except to tell the slain soldiers that she will always be leading and standing over them) but she reinforces that this transition is not
something to be feared, and implies that it will lead to something far better than the current situation of the dying person. While fictionalised descriptions of this transformative process abound, non-fiction accounts of near-death experiences, the moment of death, or personal musings on what may lie beyond the life that we know also shed light on how our own transformation might occur. In *The Problem of Pain* (1940), C.S. Lewis describes the possibility of heaven in the following way:

> The world is like a picture with a golden background, and we the figures in that picture. Until you step off the plan of the picture into the large dimensions of death you cannot see the gold. But we have reminders of it. To change our metaphor, the blackout is not quite complete. There are chinks. At times the daily scene looks big with its secret. (p.153)

Philip Gould’s wife, Gail Rebuck (in her postscript to Philip’s memoir of his death), describes her husband’s death in uncertain terms:

> I have discussed the moment of Philip’s death with many friends, some religious and some most definitely not. It was an incredible moment of bliss as he shuddered and died. It was as if I had glanced at infinity and felt the small hospital room suffused with light. My rational self says I probably imagined all of this – that this moment was a combination of emotional intensity, exhaustion and the Gregorian chant we had listened to for ten hours – but I would like to believe it was Philip’s last gift to me as his soul departed. (2012, pp. 201-202)

Isabel Allende is more forthcoming about her certainty of the spiritual nature of her daughter, Paula’s, death. In her description of the final moments of Paula’s life, she unflinchingly describes a situation that many would ridicule as impossible. Her courage in sharing her own lived experience, without censoring elements that others might use to shame her, is admirable and inspirational. I quote it at length here because I feel that to break the passage would be to break the circle of spirit that surrounds Paula in her passing:

> All during the slow night, we waited, remembering the difficult moments, but especially the happy ones, telling stories, crying a little and smiling a lot, honouring the light of Paula as she sank deeper and deeper into the final sleep, her breast barely rising at slower and slower intervals. Her mission in this world was to unite all those who passed through her life, and that night we all felt sheltered beneath her starry wings, immersed in that pure silence where perhaps angels reign. Voices became murmurs, the shape of objects and the faces of our family began to fade, silhouettes fused and blended; suddenly I realised that others were among us. Granny was there in her percale dress and marmalade stained apron, with her fresh scent of plums and large blue eyes. Tata, with his Basque beret and rustic cane, was sitting in a chair near the bed. Beside him, I saw a small, slender woman with Gypsy features, who smiled at me when our glances met: Memé, I suppose, but I didn’t dare speak to her for fear she would shimmer and vanish like a mirage. In other corners of the room, I thought I saw Mama Hilda with her knitting in her hands, my brother Juan, praying beside the nuns and children from Paula’s school in Madrid, my father-in-law, still young, and a court of kindly old people from the geriatric home Paula used to visit in her childhood. Only a while later, the unmistakable hand of Tío Ramón fell on my shoulder, and I clearly heard Michael’s voice; to my right, I saw Ildemaro, looking at Paula with the tenderness he reserved just for her. I felt Ernesto’s presence materialising through the window-pane; he was barefoot, dressed in aikido.
attire, a solid figure that crossed the room without touching the floor and leaned over the bed to kiss his wife on the lips. “Soon, my beautiful girl; wait for me on the other side,” he said, and removed the cross he always wore and placed it around her neck. Then I handed him the wedding ring I had worn for exactly one year, and he slipped it on Paula’s finger as he had the day they were married. (1995, p.329)

Allende closes her extraordinary memoir with a simple and poetic acknowledgement of the transformation that has taken place:

Godspeed, Paula, woman.
Welcome, Paula, spirit. (p.330)

The Performance Landscape

My preparation for this programme feels fragmented; rehearsals are pieced together from bits of time when Stephen and I are in both in Brisbane, individual songs are worked here and there with various tutors and coaches, ideas and strategies for the performance are coming together and drifting away as I struggle to get an idea of the programme as a whole. I have sung Kindertotenlieder before (ten years ago) but I feel as though I am coming to it as an utterly different person and a very different singer. The Mussorgsky are new to me, and the Russian language (while passingly familiar from other repertoire and my time spent living in Eastern Europe) is a barrier to the speedy assimilation I usually demand of myself.

Amid all this, I am scheduled to attend an art song festival in Los Angeles. None of my repertoire for this programme is scheduled to be coached in L.A. but I take it with me anyway, hoping that there might be a chance to work it into some of my sessions. These two cycles turn out to be the catalysts for some of the most stimulating musical experiences of the trip. One of my pianists in L.A. had been hoping to play the Mussorgsky with someone at this festival and, as soon as we discover our common ground, we set to work preparing it right away. Another pianist, allocated to me by a scheduling mistake although we have nothing to perform together, turns out to be interested in learning Kindertotenlieder, and another collaborative relationship is born. There are also a number of Russians among the musicians at the festival, and my winning streak is complete. Without planning it (or even guessing that it might be possible), I am surrounded by all the people I need to work on this programme and have access to coaches who can help me to open the doors into the worlds of these two cycles.
Mussorgsky takes centre stage for the first couple of weeks. I coach the whole cycle with a Russian pianist who diplomatically points out that my Russian language pronunciation is more Bond villain than actual lyric diction. She and another Russian pianist/coach on the faculty begin to open up the cultural world behind the texts of the songs. They tell me of the cultural connotations of the poetry, clear up tricky translations and meanings, and their emotional responses to the songs expose a Russianness that had been dawning on me since listening to native interpreters on record. The Russian emotional landscape of death is bitter and bleak, as much of Russian life has been throughout history. I have different ideas about, and reactions to, these pieces but I strike a compromise within myself: while the narrator might be full of Russian reactions to these deaths, Death herself has no national allegiance or agenda and when she speaks I have my chance to find another message in these works. My pianist, Bridget, and I spend time together talking through what we find in the pieces: where the deaths might actually occur, what they might mean to Death and to her conquests, and how our two voices combine to fill out the characters and settings so carefully painted by Mussorgsky and Golenishchev-Kutuzov. We are reminded in a long coaching with a faculty member who has performed and recorded these songs often, that the pianist’s voice must equal the singer’s own in expression and colour if we want to fully convey the many meanings and layers of complexity that an audience can take away from these songs.

During my final two weeks in Los Angeles, I spend several sessions working on Kindertotenlieder with one of the participant pianists and some of the faculty. The major problem with this work is that it was conceived for chamber orchestra and doesn’t convert well to the piano – the discomfort of a pianist makes it harder to be comfortable as a singer. However, there are ways around the difficulties and even some advantages to the configuration. Being able to work these songs with just one fellow collaborator allows more intimacy and fluidity of exchange, which is a real gift when working on such intense emotional material. My pianist, Bethany, and I have great chemistry and we seem to pick up on each other’s ideas and direction as if by osmosis. We coach with the brilliant collaborative pianist, Martin Katz, and with his depth of knowledge about both voice and piano he opens up a world of understanding for each of us into the other’s processes,
challenges, and potential. After an incredibly short time, we are working like a single unit, both of us entirely open to and supportive of the other, channelling our shared passion for our respective discipline into extremely rewarding music-making.

Of the two cycles presented here, Kindertotenlieder is far more regularly performed and recorded. The Russian language can be difficult to master (non-Russians must first find their way around the unfamiliar alphabet before attempting to pronounce the words) and Mussorgsky was both less prolific and has been less celebrated (both in his own time and since) than Mahler. Recording Kindertotenlieder appears to be a kind of benchmark for a serious recitalist, and even singers who are more known for their operatic careers are likely to approach this work. As one of the most well-known orchestral cycles, operatic performers who sing regularly with orchestras often make it part of their repertoire (despite the fact that the size of orchestra it was written for is much smaller than that used for most operas). On the other hand the Songs and Dances of Death are a relative rarity, recorded mostly by Russians and mostly in orchestral arrangements. Like Kindertotenlieder, these orchestral arrangements make this cycle popular with performers who usually perform in opera as both the orchestrations by Rimsky-Korsakov/Glazunov and Shostakovich are scored for large, lush ensembles.

Although one of the songs is specifically sung by a father, Kindertotenlieder is just as often sung by women as it is by men (perhaps more so) and many of the most famous recordings of the work are by female singers. It is rarely sung out of its original keys and remains largely the preserve of low voices in both genders. In recorded history, the cycle (and many other vocal works by Mahler) has become famously linked with Kathleen Ferrier who was one of the first singers to bring Mahler’s music to the international stage again after the Second World War (Mahler’s Jewish heritage had caused his music to be banned by the Nazi party during that time.) Ferrier’s voice found a home in Mahler’s vocal repertoire and she became strongly identified with that composer as her career expanded and she appeared in performance and on record singing his work.

I don’t think it has been sufficiently recognised that Kathleen Ferrier played a very vital role in creating the new culture with regard to Mahler, his reception in post war Holland and elsewhere. In retrospect we see her as one of the founding artists who really changed the way people heard and thought about the music of Gustav Mahler. One of the most
striking contributions made to that was by Kathleen Ferrier in association, of course, with Bruno Walter in that incredible performance of the work [Das Lied von der Erde] in 1947. (Donald Mitchell in Jackson, 2004)

Mahler’s Das Lied von der Erde became particularly identified with Ferrier’s illness and untimely death from cancer. Her final performance of this work in London is remembered by audience members at the time for its poignancy as her pain and personal circumstances were all too clear to those who loved the singer and her music (Jackson, 2004). Besides Ferrier’s recording, it is difficult to say which other performers have influenced the interpretation I have been building over the recent months. In preparing this programme, no single performance has been more important than another and, having sung this work before, I’m familiar with many great recordings that I admire. Among mezzo sopranos, Marilyn Horne (1970/ R 2013), Anne Sofie von Otter (2003/ R 2006), and Janet Baker (1967/ R 1999), are the recordings I have come to know best. In the male voice, baritones Thomas Hampson (1997), and Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau (all these recordings are listed under Mahler, 1905 in the reference list) are most familiar to me in this work and likely to be most influential.

In the Russian recorded history of the Songs and Dances of Death, three artists stand out for me: Boris Christoff (1958/ R 2003), Galina Vishnevskaya (1976/ R 2004), and Dmitri Hvorostovsky (1993/ R 2006) (these recordings are listed under Mussorgsky, 1882 in the reference list). All three recorded and performed these songs with the orchestrations mentioned above (the latter two using the Shostakovich version). Both arrangements sound as if they are more from the pen of the orchestrators than the composer – the best representation of Mussorgsky’s work is the only one we have directly from him, written for voice and piano. Piano recordings of all three exist, although I have been mostly engaged with the latter two performers and their intrepretations in the orchestral versions. The sense from all three performers is that Mussorgsky’s Death is someone terrifying or horrific, and even Death’s gentler moments are generally conveyed with sounds that drip with evil intent. All three performers are also internationally recognised as great operatic artists, and this background comes across in all three with their dramatic characterisations and ability to bring the story and the players to life as each small drama unfolds.
Russian life has not been easy over the past century. All three of these performers have lived through times of crisis and difficult regimes and these performers come from peoples who have much to share about death and dying from their own history. Galina Vishnevskaya explains the motivations behind her interpretations of these songs in some detail.

I came to that song cycle armed with vocal and acting skills, having behind me fifteen years of work on the stage and a rich life experience. I had something to convey to an audience about death, having myself been through the loss of a child: he had died in my arms. I would never forget how in desperation I had collapsed on the floor by his bed, crying, cursing, begging that my little child not be taken from me. How, insane with grief, I tried to breathe my own breath into his ever-colder lips.

And as I later lay dying of consumption I was spellbound by the presentiment of a great transition from this earthly life to an eternal one. Vivid in memory were the images of the blockade of Leningrad: frozen corpses sprawling in the streets; death mowing down hundreds of thousands of people. Those images crowded my imagination, organizing themselves, taking on the clarity of a sketch, the precision of phrasing, the idiom of the stage. (Vishnevskaya, 1984, p.267)

The descriptions in her memoir of lived experiences of the harshness of Russian life as a young child seeing adults who drank away their sorrows, through near starvation and being surrounded by corpses in the streets during the second world war, to being under strict professional and personal control by the ensuing Soviet regime all give the reader some insight into the deep well of memory and emotion from which Vishnevskaya draws when she sings.

Performance Inspiration

On my return from Los Angeles, Stephen is away in China and when he gets back we have only a couple of weeks available to us before I am due to go away to Sydney to work on an opera for a month. When I return we will have only four weeks together before the performance. Time is feeling tight and extremely precious. We manage to fit in a couple of rehearsals in late August, while we are both in Brisbane but we’re both so busy that there isn’t much time in either of our schedules.

When we pick up work together again in October, I am frantic with worry about this programme. The performance is only a few weeks away, I’m struggling with one or two technical aspects of the singing, and Stephen and I have yet to find any kind of union in what we’re doing (at least, from my perspective). An initial run of the Mussorgsky with a Russian speaker present to check on my language progress
is hurried and focuses more on my challenges with the text than any work Stephen and I might need to do between us. We finally get some slow working time together and things start to pull into place a little. However, my brain and body are absolutely fried with stress and I’m struggling to hold everything together enough to focus on the work at hand without worrying about how much is left to be done. Life has provided a pile up of added stressors and I feel like I’m caught in a nose-to-tail traffic incident on a highway at rush hour, when everybody has someplace to be in a hurry and everything needs attending to NOW. I have coursework to be done, future course applications to submit, a DVD to make full of other repertoire to accompany these submissions, a demanding visitor from overseas to take care of, and my impending departure from Brisbane (and perhaps Australia) to deal with as my partner and I can’t afford to be based here anymore. It’s all too much to take in, and far too much to manage while I’m also trying to prepare this recital.

Chaos intensifies its presence in my life and I appear at a session with both Stephen and my voice teacher, Lisa, in a state of near exhaustion after problems with our unwanted houseguest lead to a sleepless night on the sofa and result in my leaving home to try to get some peace. This is an important session and I need both Stephen and Lisa present so I can work on some technical difficulties while putting things together with the piano. I can’t afford to be running so close to empty on energy today. I explain my stress to them both and that I need to work slowly and carefully to allow for being a little frazzled. Stephen is, of course, as reliably constant and solid as always. But it is Lisa who completely blows me away. Although we work together well, I’ve always felt that we’re not very close. However, out of nowhere when I feel I am drowning in stress, a hand reaches out to pull me back to sanity, and it is hers. She encourages me in my progress, helps me to focus my thoughts where I need to take care with my technique, and reminds me that I know what to do and how to do it. When she offers, at the end, to come along to our final rehearsals in the venue I am completely floored. All the support and assistance I could wish for has been handed to me. The session goes well, and a weight lifts from me as I realise that all the things I was so afraid would never fall into place have lined themselves up ready for the final rehearsals and the performance.
However, I’m not out of the woods yet. I still struggle with some of the technical vocal challenges and have trouble remaining detached from my difficulties while remaining positive about what I can achieve. It’s all physically draining and I am judicious with the amount of energy I expend on the final rehearsals, so as to keep something (anything) in reserve for performance. The last run goes well – really well – and I finally learn the truth behind the advice that you must always keep something in reserve and never, ever, give one hundred percent. It’s a revelation. I’ve been trying so hard to fix my technique, to interpret, to impress Stephen, to prove that I’m trying as hard as a person could possibly try. Ironically, the day I stop trying is the day that I begin to make headway.

The performance comes and goes and is a great success. There seems little value in describing it here. It is the journey of preparation of this program where the major learning happened for me. Stephen and I come together on the night to make something very moving. As we close the Mahler, there are tears pouring down Stephen’s face as well as on the faces of many in the audience, and I know that our connection with each other and with the music has brought something rare and beautiful to us all. The Mussorgsky songs that had been worrying me sweep us all away with their colour and character. Before I know it, the whole thing is over and we are celebrating the thrill of a performance that has brought us all so much.

The performance world of these two cycles is one of confrontation and challenge, visceral pain and grief, and an emotional rollercoaster from the complex inner worlds of the Mahler to the colourful, almost humorous extroversion of the Mussorgsky. Three women from the fields of monologue performance and stand-up comedy inhabit these worlds in their work and have shed light for me on ways in which difficult emotional material might be conveyed.

Eve Ensler’s innovative work *The Vagina Monologues* (Mazur, Doelger, Shalit, & Stone, 2002/ R 2012), shines a light on the shame, fear, and discomfort associated with discussing women’s bodies. Her powerful messages of reclaiming and celebrating women’s experiences of their most intimate and private selves is delivered through the medium of monologue storytelling, often using some of the
most graphic and confronting narratives from the interviews she conducted throughout her research. Although humour is often present in the stories, and acts as a kind of valve through which the audience can release some of the pressure associated with what they are hearing, what shines through more generally is the depth of love and compassion Ensler has for the women who have given of themselves for her work, and for people who might be changed by being exposed to the experiences shared and the courage demonstrated. As in the *Kindertotenlieder*, there are a variety of perspectives on the central theme, all illuminating a different aspect of experience. Ensler’s material speaks for itself – other than adopting the accents of her subjects, her delivery is contained, composed, and direct – as though a conversation were being held between a few friends.

Whoopi Goldberg’s series of monologues from her 1985 performance *Direct from Broadway* (1985/R 2005), deal with similarly confronting narratives but are delivered in a more theatrical style (the relationship between the Goldberg and Ensler monologues is similar to that between the Mahler and Mussorgsky cycles). She inhabits each character fully, often with elements of costuming, and uses humour to divert the audience away from what is eventually revealed to be the truth behind each character. When she has successfully relaxed her audience into the flow of comedy at the expense of the character and their experiences, the truth is revealed with a flat, matter-of-fact manner that packs a visceral punch. Suddenly, the air-headed California girl is revealed to have given herself an abortion with a coathanger, the cute small child has been burning herself with bleach because of her shame about being black, the fast-talking junkie/thief has wandered into Anne Frank’s house and begun musing on the holocaust. Like the shock of realisation in the Mussorgsky songs that the charming suitor under the window is Death, or that Death is the intended babysitter for the sick child, Goldberg uses pacing and style of delivery to create the heightened awareness of the turning moment for the audience. The tension created as the audience discovers that all is not as it seems drives home the performer’s message that the picture is only as clear as she is willing to make it and confronts people with their own assumptions and prejudices.
A performer’s willingness and ability to make themselves extremely vulnerable to an audience when dealing with dark or difficult emotional material (as the thematic material in both of these song cycles) can prove to be the catalyst for an extraordinary moment in performance art. In 2012 a piece of stand-up comedy was recorded that quickly became a global phenomenon for the performer’s courage, honesty, and grace, as she shared a life under fire with her unsuspecting audience. She had no idea it would happen, but Tig Notaro’s raw live set at comedy club Largo (Notaro, 2013), during which she shared the shock of being diagnosed with breast cancer in both breasts only three days earlier (and this after some months in which she had been hospitalised for pneumonia, lost her mother in an accident, and broken up with her partner) struck such a chord with her fans and with her fellow performers that she was encouraged to release the recording to the public. Available only as an audio track, her voice belies any struggle or turmoil on her part, rather, she repeatedly tells the audience that it’s ok, that they’ll be ok, and she promises to check on how they’re all doing when she’s in hospital. This woman is laying her heart and her struggles on the table with absolute simplicity and without certainty of purpose; she only knows that she can’t tell the “silly jokes” that she had planned after what has happened to her. In the liner notes of the CD recording, Kira Hesser describes the feeling of being in the audience:

We all saw the ultimate embodiment of what comedy is supposed to do: deeply personal tragedies somehow transformed, with the enormous, necessary power of an open-hearted audience, into brilliantly written truths that we’ll all take home with us and keep with us as long as we’ll have a sound enough mind to remember that show. If schadenfreude is pleasure derived from the misfortune of others, we all shuffled into another corner last night, schadenfreude’s cousin; we’re not laughing at you, we’re crying with you but trying very hard to accept this avalanche of misfortune through the more edible prism of humour. (Notaro, 2013)

Surely this is also the goal of the repertoire in this study – to transform our tragedies into things that can help us to grow as individuals and strengthen the human connection we share in order that we might be more resilient against the onslaughts of life.

A couple of days after the performance, I crack. The stresses and worries of the past months ambush me and in one fell swoop I am knocked back into oblivion. I can’t possibly care that the performance went well, that I have others fast approaching, or that an entire English programme is waiting to be learned. As my
body convulses from the force of constant, heavy sobs, the only two words I can say are “I can’t...” – I can’t do all this, I can’t make other people more comfortable by being someone who loves or cares less, I can’t carry on anymore in a life that is so consistently misunderstood. Death understands. I feel her arms around me, helping me curl up into a ball, and I hear her whispering to me that there’s always a way out. She is Mussorgsky’s Death that I so recently brought to life – I imagine her saying the same things to him as he raised another bottle and drank himself into his early grave.
CHAPTER 3: THE GLORIOUS DEAD

Butterworth *Bredon Hill* and *A Shropshire Lad*/Vaughan Williams *Songs of Travel*

The path trodden by wayfarers and pilgrims followed the railway and then turned into the fields. Here Lara stopped, closed her eyes and took a good breath of the air, which carried all the smells of the huge countryside. It was dearer to her than her kin, better than a lover, wiser than a book. For a moment she rediscovered the meaning of her life. She was here on earth to make sense of its wild enchantment and to call each thing by its right name…

(Boris Pasternak, from *Dr Zhivago*)

The English art song tradition draws heavily on pastoral imagery and folk tune reference. These major works from that tradition have a gently engaging, vernacular feel in their treatment of the themes of this research. Butterworth’s *Bredon Hill and other songs* and *Six Songs from A Shropshire Lad* both set poetry from the set of sixty-three poems by A.E. Housman, published under the title *A Shropshire Lad*. These cycles deal with the fleeting beauty of rural and village life, and mourn the loss of those who die tragically young, while concealing an immense wellspring of pain at being isolated within the crowds by hidden, unaccepted desires that keep the narrator from living a full life. They have a particular resonance with, and connection to, the time of the First World War; Butterworth himself was killed while serving England in the Battle of the Somme in 1916.

Vaughan Williams’ *Songs of Travel* lend an English voice and style to the wayfaring song tradition led by Schubert’s *Winterreise* and continued in Mahler’s *Lieder Eines Fahrenden Gesellen*. Here, death is taken in stride as part of life and nature, as the journeyman makes his way in the world. Transformational growth is expressively communicated in these settings, both through natural imagery, and as human life moves toward death. These cycles offer singer and pianist a challenge in delivering the material with the simplicity and clarity befitting the musical and poetic style, while still finding a depth of human feeling to convey the emotional nature of the losses and changes so frequently referenced.
Context
Almost as soon as the second recital is done, I turn my attention to the third. Events take an unexpected turn that signify a new direction for this project. Stephen is unable to continue being pianist, as well as supervisor, on this project and it is with a very heavy heart that I let him go. Fortunately, an excellent pianist who is also a very dear old friend is living relatively nearby in Newcastle and is willing to play with me – she is the only person I can imagine continuing with on this very personal and intimate journey. We have known each other sixteen years, love each other very much, and respect each other a great deal as musicians. We’ve also been wanting to perform together again as it has been eight years since we last shared the stage. In a way, things have worked out perfectly. Another interesting development has come about. This turn of events that might once have levelled me mentally and emotionally, has in fact revealed a source of resilience that I didn’t know I had – I am changing, strengthening, growing. The black dog might still howl to be let in from time to time, but at least I seem to have reallocated it to a kennel outside the house, if not completely off the property. Given my recent anxiety attacks this a surprise, and a very good one.

And so I make new plans and continue on. I have very little time to spend with this repertoire (all of which is new) before performing it in February, and I have other singing commitments to fulfill before I can really focus on it properly. One of these commitments is, coincidentally, taking me to London – it seems fitting to be going to England before this recital and I resolve to spend what time I can over there looking for resources and inspiration relating to this repertoire that can’t be found where I live.

Late nineteenth (and early twentieth) century Britain was a paradoxical place in which to be living and creating art. Industrial technologies and progressive social movements were changing the country at an unprecedented pace while conservative governing policies and nostalgia for a simpler, pastoral way of life were influencing the output of people from all across the creative professions. The British Empire was still a global powerhouse and yet there was much looking inward in search of a national identity, particularly in England. It is in this time of paradoxes, that A. E. Housman created his poetic cycle A Shropshire Lad. It is a set of 63 poems following the fortunes, adventures, and misfortunes of Terence
Hearsay (the first person narrator of many of the poems) and the friends and acquaintances with whom he comes into contact, although the full narrative is not apparent to the casual reader and can only be put together using Housman’s poetry and fragments from his notebooks (Efrati, 2002, pp.162-164). Housman himself was a paradoxical character. A professor of Latin and Classical Studies who spent much of his career at Cambridge University, he was a lifelong secret homosexual with a predilection for sadomasochistic pornography and “serious medical sexology” texts (Howarth, 2009, p.766). Without knowing about Housman’s secret life, it is clear that there are many layers to his poetry which can, on the surface, seem simplistic and unsophisticated. However, taking a fuller view of Housman’s life into account, the poetry begins to speak volumes about the man who wrote it and the messages contained within (Carol Efrati investigates this fully in her 2002 book.) It’s no surprise that he felt it necessary to hide his true feelings. While sodomy had been a crime since 1533, in 1885 the Labouchere Amendment made conviction without proof of sodomy much easier. Commonly known as the “Blackmailer’s Charter” (due to the threat of blackmail that could hang over all men, gay or not, if someone threatened to report supposed illicit behaviour), it outlawed “all erotic acts between males whether in public or private, and was responsible for Oscar Wilde’s imprisonment in 1895.” (Mighall, 2002, p.xix)

Housman’s poetic output in *A Shropshire Lad* is full of typical English pastoral imagery, military vigour, and pleasant village life which is cut through with a terrible, solitary personal pain which makes more sense when we know about Housman’s private life and that, as the poet W. H. Auden put it, he “kept tears like dirty postcards in a drawer”. (Howarth, 2009, p.765)

The terrible aloneness of Housman’s luckless lads in a world of heterosexual couples is evoked again and again, especially in poems ostensibly celebrating the spring. This is perhaps inevitable, as spring is the season of courtship and coupling in much of nature’s domain, not excluding the human. Spring is the traditional time for couples to pair off, but not for Housman’s personae. A poem will begin with a magnificent description of spring. The speaker seems in harmony with his world, in harmony with nature. Then his terrible loneliness, his basic separation from the natural world, intrudes and reverses the mood of the opening. (Efrati, 2002, p.140)

George Butterworth selected eleven of Housman’s *A Shropshire Lad* poems for his cycles, *Bredon Hill and other songs* and *Six Songs from A Shropshire Lad*. They were written between 1909 and 1911 and the interchangeability of the songs suggests that they may not have been conceived as a cycle (or cycles) that held
one narrative arc; in any case, he was certainly not following Housman’s Terence Hearsay narrative. Like Housman, questions have also arisen about Butterworth’s sexuality. However, unlike Housman, nothing can be conclusively proved one way or another (Murphy, 2012, p.161). The publication of Six Songs from A Shropshire Lad is dedicated to Butterworth’s close friend, Victor Annesley Barrington Kennet, but this proves nothing, particularly at a time when intense male friendships were common and in a life history that documents no intimate relationships with members of either sex. It is possible that an educated and artistically sensitive man like Butterworth could have read between the lines of Housman’s poetry (as some other contemporaries did) and chose to set those with which he felt an affinity, particularly as these simple, pastoral poems would preclude being found out by those who read only the surface content while expressing much more to others in the know. We will never know one way or another. It is my gut feeling that he was gay and did connect his own emotional state with Housman’s work, partly because of the poems he chose to set and the way in which he set them, and partly from my own artist’s intuition. Some might argue that it matters very little either way. To them, I would say that, like Housman and his poetry, Butterworth’s music contains layers. It may be simple, pleasant, and pastoral on the surface but is deeply rooted in the emotional response to the ephemeral nature of life and its experiences, and the deep sorrow and regret that accompanies the realisation of this state.

Having an intuitive feeling for the underlying sensitivity that gave rise to this musical expression of the poetry he chose to set, opens up a world of expression for me as a performer. The sense that I have of this ideological connection between Butterworth and Housmann gives the music and poetry a feeling of unity that resonates with me. I have a similar feeling of unity between Vaughan Williams and Stevenson in the Songs of Travel – an overriding sense that here are two men whose similarity of spirit drives them to create in similar ways and to bring life through their art to similar expressions of emotion. Despite their deviating life paths, there is an underlying unity in the creative impulse; a sense that they share something on an ideological level just as Housman and Butterworth may have done.

The dominant impression is one of absolute integrity to the spirit of Stevenson. Vaughan Williams’ capacity for empathy … blots out the obvious dissimilarity between the frail, tubercular, restlessly wandering and sensitively observing poet and the solid, slowly
achieving, upper-middle class composer, and produces instead a work as fertile in its Romantic wayfaring images for early-20th-century England as was Die Winterreise for early-19th-century Vienna. The images themselves are different … but the Wanderer impulse associated with both joy and sorrow, pervades … Vaughan Williams [and] Schubert … alike. Perhaps it is part of an escapist dream; perhaps it stems from a desire to experience all things, to observe rather than judge. (Banfield, quoted in Hallmark, 2003, p.133)

Robert Louis Stevenson’s bright, compassionate spirit and depth of humanity come shining through in both his creative output and in writings about his life. His early death was not only a loss to the literary world but also “the loss of a sparkling and sympathetic personality, a man of wit, of kindness, of warmth and humour, who made an impact, usually favourable, on everyone he met.” (Calder, 1980, p.7.) A rebellious and unconventional young man, he was unsettled by many of the aspects of the traditional Calvinist Christian society in which he was raised and spent much of his youth in the taverns and brothels around the backstreets of Edinburgh. He was drawn to the human experience in whatever ways it manifests itself and his writing that speaks as naturally to children as it does to adults, his experiences with high and low society as a student, and his easy assimilation with the people in his later home in Samoa all point to a man who truly and deeply cared for his fellow human beings. His Songs of Travel, although not specifically linked or intended as a poetic cycle, are an excellent illustration of a man in whose “life and work the Calvinist and the Bohemian were constantly confronting each other and the result is a body of writing that illuminates the human condition with power and subtlety.” (Daiches, 1994, p.51)

Vaughan Williams’ selections of poems to set for his Songs of Travel cycle does provide a kind of narrative arc, and one that also demonstrates a great sensitivity for the condition of the wandering artist (the narrator makes more than one reference to perhaps being a singer) who must follow the call of the road, wherever it may lead. The songs were written and performed (with the exception of the final song, discovered and published posthumously) only a few years before Butterworth’s Housman settings. Both men were involved in preserving and promoting England’s folk music tradition and their output in these respective cycles seems to answer the questions Vaughan Williams posed to himself in his essay “British Music” when he wrote: “How are we to find the national character? What is its simplest, most spontaneous and most undoubted manifestation?” (Vaughan Williams in Manning, 2008, p. 44).
The simplicity and spontaneity of the *Songs of Travel* belie the layers beneath what feels to the listener like something familiar, much as Butterworth’s music does. In evoking something that sounds so much like a melody that the listener may have heard a long time ago, as Schubert does in *Der Lindenbaum* (the fifth song in *Winterreise*), these composers speak directly to the heart of their audience. Their musical brilliance exists not in showy examples of forward looking, paradigm shifting harmonies or developments in style, but in doing so effectively in music what the poets have done with their words; conjuring in the mind of the listener the image of Britain and the feeling of being surrounded by British people and British nature.

Our music, then, if it is to live, must represent the people; folk-song is not the only people’s music, though it is the most perfect and the most beautiful form. Besides the music made by the people there is also the music made for the people – our music-hall tunes, our popular revivalist hymns; they are often vulgar or silly, but they do represent a form of unadulterated musical expression, and this desire for expression might be satisfied in a greater and nobler way by some musician who could purge away the dross and discover the fine gold underneath. (Vaughan Williams in Manning, 2008, p. 46)

**Thematic Landscape**

*My whole life has been lived with a deep and abiding connection to the natural world. I’m a country kid, raised against the backdrop of the New Zealand “King Country”, and the idea of growing up without a connection to nature is unfathomable to me. When we move into the city for my mother to pursue her career, my heart breaks and a large part of it is left behind in the bushland, rivers, beaches, and pastures of my homeland. But it’s true that you can’t take the country out of the girl, and everywhere I go in the world, I seek a connection to the land to remind me of home. Actual trips back into the countryside where I am from give me an indescribable sense of peace, belonging, and recognition – I belong here and the land knows it and welcomes me back as its own daughter. New Zealand Māori culture has a concept called tūrangawaewae; literally translated, it means “standing place of/for feet” or, more commonly, “a place to stand”. It is the name for a place from which you draw your power; a place in which you feel connected, strong, and truly at home in a physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual way. It seems to me to be a perfect description of how many English artists, writers, poets, and musicians felt about their homeland at the turn of the last century. The land nurtures, supports, and holds you. It values you, and you, in turn, know that*
you owe a huge part of who you are to the fact that it helped to raise you. In connection with this concept, when you introduce yourself formally in the Māori language, you first begin with naming your mountain and river, before moving on to naming human elements such as your tribal connections and then, finally, your name. Nature is not only around you, it is within you; it is you.

It is difficult for me to find words to describe the myriad ways in which I feel this to be true in my own life. In times of intensity – trouble, joy, stress, bliss – through all the many and varied experiences that life has sent my way, the land has been my source of strength and constant companion wherever I have been, even when far from home (although my own homeland in New Zealand is something I long for whenever I am away). As a small child I used to think that the ocean remembered me whenever I swam in it and years later, as an adult living in Prague, one of the major causes of my terrible homesickness was that the ocean was at least two entire countries away. I have always needed to maintain my connection to the land to maintain my connection to myself; in the darkest times of my depression, I remain shut inside – lost to myself and lost to nature, in which I might discover myself once again. When I do find I am able to return to the land, it marks the beginning of healing and a return to an embrace of earth and air that has held me all my life, loves me unconditionally, and asks nothing of me in return. These songs resonate at my core as the narrators of the poems seek healing, redemption, and reflection in the natural world around them and so many of the melodies drift into consciousness like something remembered from a very long time ago. They bind me and their creators as kindred spirits; people whose homeland is in their blood, although they might travel far, and for whom the call from the natural world means solace, acceptance, and home.

The songs in these cycles use the apparent simplicity of a life connected with nature and pursued in traditional rural settings as a foil to the profound and painful themes of death and transformation. In both poetry and music, their unsophisticated, folk-like structure and style belie the many layers of emotion beneath the accessible façade. The natural world comes to the fore and surrounds the narrators with examples of the transformational cycles that often lead to death but which also give rise to the next cycle of life in the larger ebb and flow of nature. Human lives and deaths are portrayed in juxtaposition to the surrounding
natural environment, as being intertwined with the elements, or as being acted upon by natural phenomena. The transience of existence and all its many changes and manifestations is not only highlighted by the narrators’ stories and actions, and illustrated by the observations on nature, but is also largely unlamented by the storytellers in these songs. There are many painful experiences represented here – the ache of separation, the difficulty in forging a life of authenticity, the cruel and unpredictable ways in which we lose the ones we love, the seemingly inescapable nature of an often bitter fate – but there is a sort of regretful acceptance throughout of the inevitability of one thing giving way to another and another as time passes.

The unique character of a person’s transformative experiences when out in the natural world make this programme’s thematic landscape somewhat elusive in terms of core literature. While there are numerous writings in all kinds of genres about these sorts of experiences, there is no central text here that conveniently encapsulates the history of how it feels to be called out onto the road and into the wider world, or to find the call of your own heart and soul answered by the voice of Nature. Rather, each individual piece of writing around these themes exists as a signpost to others who are similarly called, much as Robert Frost’s poem, *The Road Not Taken*, gives encouragement and solace to those of us who are society’s misfits, despite the fact that it may not have been written with that intent (Kendall, 2012, pp.179-180):

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I shall be telling this with a sigh
Somewhere ages and ages hence:
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I –
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference
(from *The Road Not Taken*, Frost, R. in Kendall, 2012, p.179)
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The musical style of these English songs, that takes so much inspiration from the English folk song tradition, calls to mind much more than musical memory. As well as evoking a sense of place due to its connection to a particular area, folk-song also invokes the better angels of our nature in its many references to legends, proverbs, and lessons of how life ought to be lived (or warnings of how it shouldn’t). Folk-like melodies also provide us with a link to our own past, to the generations gone before, to the lives they once lived and the land in which they lived them. Jack London’s novel, *Call of the Wild*, uses the life of a dog leaning back into his wolf ancestry as an allegory for the way in which humans might also
be called back, through the generations, to a more elemental, wild way of being. He uses the howl (the folk song of the wolf) to describe how a living being might connect with its ancient past through the ritual of shared sound.

With the aurora borealis flaming coldly overhead, or the stars leaping in the frost dance, and the land numb and frozen under its pall of snow, this song of the huskies might have been the defiance of life, only it was pitched in minor key, with long-drawn waailings and half sobs, and was more the pleading of life, the articulate travail of existence. It was an old song, old as the breed itself – one of the first songs of the younger world in a day when songs were sad. It was invested with the woe of unnumbered generations, this plaint by which Buck was so strangely stirred. When he moaned and sobbed, it was with the pain of living that was of old the pain of his wild fathers, and the fear and mystery of the cold and dark that was to them fear and mystery. And that he should be stirred by it marked the completeness with which he harked back through the ages of fire and roof to the raw beginnings of life in the howling ages. (1903/R 1994, p.40)

That call to an ancient, elemental way of life is not only part of the folk song tradition but also part of the nostalgia for a simple, peaceful, pastoral existence that is evident in the British nationalistic fervour of the time in which the songs of this programme were composed. Human activities around village life and farming culture (especially when contrasted with the chaos of city life and, later, the slaughter of World War I) were revered and held to be purer and more innocent than the broken down lives of the modern day. In reference to Isaac Walton’s 1653 book, *The Compleat Angler*, soldier-poet Philip Edward Thomas wrote: “Since the war began I have not met so English a book, a book that filled me so with a sense of England, as this… In Walton’s book, I touched the antiquity and sweetness of England – English fields, English people, English poetry, all together.” (Philip Edward Thomas in Stallworthy, 2002, p.135). The idea that rural activities bring humans closer to nature, and hence closer to their original sense of being and purpose, is explored throughout literature, and deeper truths, spoken in voices of wisdom and experience, often appear in the words of writers and their characters who take part in activities in the great outdoors. This is particularly true not only of farming but also of hunting and fishing; exploits where man is pitted against nature in a test of the former’s prowess against the latter’s unassailable omnipotence. Ernest Hemingway (known for his love of the ocean, big game hunting, and the tradition of bull fighting) uses his tale *The Old Man and the Sea* (1952/R 1962) to demonstrate the inextricable destinies of man and nature, and the philosophical insights that can come when a man finds himself truly challenged by the natural world, and faces this challenge head on. In a letter to a friend, he wrote, “This is the prose that I have been working for all my life that should read easily and simply and seem short and yet have all the dimensions of
the visible world and the world of a man’s spirit.” (Hemingway on *The Old Man and the Sea* in Phillips, 1984, p.34). His use of nature as counterweight to the human spirit elevates both man and nature and provides a link through which the true character of nature can only be described by man, and the true character of man can only be illuminated by the natural world around him. This link provides much of the foundation thematic material for *The Old Man and the Sea*: “He took all his pain and what was left of his strength and his long gone pride and he put it against the fish’s agony….” (Hemingway, 1952/R 1962, p.93)

Faulkner uses a similar device in his novel *Go Down, Moses*, and the various characters of his hunters are illustrated in their interactions with both their prey and their environment. His character, McCaslin, explains the cyclical nature of existence to a young boy (and thus to the reader) as he describes all the many journeys of blood, which becomes not only a thing that they are striving to spill on their expedition but also the link between man and all other aspects of the universe as it is transformed from one thing to another through all the countless ages.

Think of all that has happened here, on this earth. All the blood hot and strong for living, pleasuring, that has soaked back into it. For grieving and suffering too, of course, but still getting something out of it for all that, getting a lot out of it, because after all you don’t have to continue to bear what you believe is suffering; you can always choose to stop that, put an end to that. And even suffering and grieving is better than nothing; there is only one thing worse than not being alive, and that’s shame. But you can’t be alive for ever, and you always wear out life long before you have exhausted the possibilities of living. And all that must be somewhere; all that could not have been invented and created just to be thrown away. And the earth is shallow; there is not a great deal of it before you come to the rock. And the earth don’t want to just keep things, hoard them; it want to use them again. Look at the seed, the acorns, at what happens even to carrion when you try to bury it: it refuses too, seethes and struggles too until it reaches light and air again, hunting the sun still. And they—" the boy saw his hand in silhouette for a moment against the window beyond which, accustomed to the darkness now, he could see sky where the scoured and icy stars glittered “—they don’t want it, need it. Besides, what would it want, itself, knocking around out there, when it never had enough time about the earth as it was, when there is plenty of room about the earth, plenty of places still unchanged from what they were when the blood used and pleased in them while it was still blood? (Faulkner, 1942, pp.133-134).

While human exploits in nature provide illumination of character and spirit, the simple memory or description of a landscape can be enough to inspire deep contemplation or bring solace to a damaged soul. Philip Edward Thomas’ widow wrote about her post World War I visits to the composer and poet, Ivor Gurney, in the prison-like asylum where he had been committed and where he lived out the last fifteen years of his life. This broken man is brought back to vitality on one
occasion by the memory of the natural environment in which he used to spend time before the war and before his illness.

The next time I went I took with me one of Edward’s own well-used Ordnance maps of Gloucester where he had often walked. This proved to have been a sort of inspiration, for Ivor Gurney at once spread it out on his bed and he and I spent the whole time I was there tracing with our fingers the lanes and byways and villages of which he knew every step and over which Edward had walked. He spent that hour in re-visiting his beloved home, in spotting a village track, a hill or a wood and seeing it all in his mind’s eye, a mental vision sharper and more actual for his heightened intensity. He trod, in a way we who were sane could not emulate, the lanes and fields he knew and loved so well, his guide being his finger tracing the way on the map. It was most deeply moving, and I knew that I had hit on an idea that gave him more pleasure than anything else I could have thought of. For he had Edward as his companion in this strange perambulation… (Stallworthy, 2002, p.151)

Essayist Ralph Waldo Emerson’s (1836) thoughts on nature encapsulate what it is that so many creative souls find in the world around them, and reflect the spirit behind the songs in this programme. Humanity and nature are drawn as kindred spirits, growing and declining together with the regular ebb and flow that maintains balance in the universal system of which both are a part. The landscape that one identifies with strongly describes the character of the person who draws their identity from that place. Equally, the place is imbued with the characteristics of the people who make it their home. Although Emerson is American, the sentiment behind his writing on nature echoes that of the English pastoral movement. Wisdom, truth, and other virtues are to be found in the land and its systems which, in turn, imbue humans with those same virtues. England and the English people become the same, made of the same stuff, and bonded by the experience of growing, transforming, declining, and regrowing together.

The lover of nature is he whose inward and outward senses are still truly adjusted to each other; who has retained the spirit of infancy even into the era of manhood. His intercourse with heaven and earth, becomes part of his daily food. In the presence of nature, a wild delight runs through the man, in spite of real sorrows. Nature says, — he is my creature, and maugre all his impertinent griefs, he shall be glad with me. Not the sun or the summer alone, but every hour and season yields its tribute of delight; for every hour and change corresponds to and authorizes a different state of the mind, from breathless noon to grimmest midnight. (Emerson, 1849, p.9)

Living with Death

When I think of journeys and paths - mountains to be climbed and rivers to be crossed - my thoughts inevitably turn to horses. There have been very few times when the twists and turns of my life have not been accompanied by the sound of hoofbeats beside me on the road; musical material that evokes the sound of marching and movement, brings this back to me every time I hear it. My earliest memory is of being on horseback. As a toddler, I am placed on the back of my
older sister’s horse and the world is suddenly revealed to me as I go from being two feet tall to sixteen hands high. From that moment on, the horse becomes a constant in my life – a companion, guardian, friend, and guide to me, as they are to so many others. Wherever I go in life, there’s a hoofprint etched on my soul that brings me back to horses.

In 2007, a huge warmblood horse called Riley comes into my life and I know that I have found a soulmate. We are cut from the same cloth, he and I, and we share an understanding that I have rarely felt with anyone in my life, animal or human. We are completely devoted to one another and we care for each other through all the ups and downs of both of our lives. We each come to the other’s call, laugh together at the way life is, love unflinchingly and without caution, and face the world in a spirit of general optimism (despite the fact that we can both be spooked by things that aren’t really there). After my wife, he’s the most important person in my life and I know he feels the same about me. When a job comes up for Sue in Australia, we face the bitter reality that moving our horses over with us isn’t an option. At nearly 21 years old, the move would be too hard on Riley - I’d be doing it more for my sake than his. He has also recently developed an intermittent lameness issue which looks like it might indicate the beginning of some kind of arthritic problem. A friend is looking for a steady, old horse for her husband to take on slow rides and we take Riley to live with her, with the agreement that we will continue to meet his medical expenses and reassess his situation when we come back on holiday in six months so that she is not stuck owning a horse with ongoing problems. While we are away, Riley is diagnosed with ringbone – a condition that has no cure and means that his health will gradually deteriorate for the rest of his life. On our return visit, Riley holds his sore leg out to me and, when I take it, leans back into a long stretch and groans loudly. I know what he’s saying to me – he’s in pain, his leg hurts - and I now know it’s not going to get any better. After a long, tearful conversation, Sue and I decide that the humane thing to do is to put him to sleep – he has had a long life, giving everything to the people he has loved, and he doesn’t deserve to be forced to carry on in pain just to assuage our grief at having to let him go. However, our friend who houses him now refuses to accept our decision, bars us from seeing him again, and takes his future care into her own hands. This is even worse than having to come to the decision to put him down. I know our friend can’t afford the expensive medical treatment he needs to
keep the pain at bay – as hard as it was to shoulder the responsibility for ending his life, it is even worse to think that he will now be forced to live out the rest of his days in pain. I have failed him in the worst possible way and I can’t find it in my heart to forgive myself. To have a life with animals is to accept responsibility for their lives and their deaths, to become familiar with the seasons of growth and decay that happen more quickly for other animals than for humans, and to be forced to make peace with the disinterested laws of nature, which can seem so uncaring to us humans. As in the songs in my English programme, Nature has its own systems and timespans, and will bring death to our lives in its own times. If Riley were wild, he’d probably already be dead; an easy prey target for hungry predators. But to be responsible for the ongoing suffering of this warm-hearted, loving soul is not something for which I was prepared. I have no choice but to continue on the path ahead of me without him (we can hardly go onto the property and steal him back), knowing that the path he is travelling without me is a painful and difficult one that I would never have wished for him.

Butterworth’s *A Shropshire Lad* songs are inextricably linked in the contemporary mind with the First World War, although they were written before the war began and the poems even earlier (first published in 1896). However, Housman’s regular references to the early deaths of fine young men made his poetry extremely popular during the war and Butterworth’s eventual death in the Somme in 1916 sealed the fate of the songs’ ongoing link with that event. Putting aside any possible motivations from their own private pain that either creator might have had, the songs do fit with the bitter, regretful tone expressed by many of Britain’s numerous soldier poets of that time. The daily presence of death endured by so many, both in the midst of conflict and at home, is often compared with nature in which seasons of death come and go as a matter of course, destruction can appear suddenly in storms and other disasters, or contrasted to its gentleness and the simple joy found in spending time in “England’s green and pleasant land” (William Blake Trust & Tate Gallery, 2000, p.446.)

One soldier poet whose love of nature and pastoral life underscores much (if not all) of his work, was Philip Edward Thomas, mentioned above in his praise for *The Compleat Angler*. His poem *As the team’s head-brass flashed out on the turn* drifts from talk of country life to talk of war and back again, seamlessly
intertwining the two, creating an overlay between images of nature and war that bring the conflict close to home and hearth.

His love of England and its seasons, celebrated so long in prose, rise again, distilled to a purer form in these poems. His awareness of the natural world, its richness and beauty, is now intensified by a sense of impending loss and the certainty of death – his own and others. His ‘war poems’ are those of a countryman perceiving the violence done by a distant conflict to the natural order of things. (Stallworthy, 2002, p.139)

Thomas’ dedication to his country, and his decision to fight for it, had much more to do with his love for the natural world held within its borders than any sense of service to king and country. Stallworthy (2002, p.135) recounts an anecdote about Thomas taking a handful of soil when asked what he would be fighting for, and replying: “Literally, for this.” His 1915 poem, “Rain”, gives the impression of a constant certainty of death in both nature and in human life. The dead are envied, but the prayer “that none whom once I loved/Is dying tonight” reminds the reader there may yet be some sweetness to life if it is hoped that others do not lose it.

Rain, midnight rain, nothing but the wild rain
On this bleak hut, and solitude, and me
Remembering again that I shall die
And neither hear the rain nor give it thanks
For washing me cleaner than I have been
Since I was born into this solitude.
Blessed are the dead that the rain rains upon:
But here I pray that none whom once I loved
Is dying tonight or lying still awake
Solitary, listening to the rain,
Either in pain or this in sympathy
Helpless among the living and the dead,
Like a cold water among broken reeds,
Myriads of broken reeds all still and stiff,
Like me who have no love which this wild rain
Has not dissolved except the love of death,
If love it be for what is perfect and
Cannot, the tempest tells me, disappoint.
(Philip Edward Thomas in Stallworthy, 2002, p.133)

Of all the soldier poets of the First World War, none is more celebrated or widely know than Wilfred Owen (with the possible exception of Siegfried Sassoon). Owen’s poetry has, itself, inspired composers to set it to music, with Benjamin Britten using some of his most celebrated works as texts in his War Requiem.

Owen’s bitter and honest accounts of the horrors of war and the terrible waste of life that war creates, made his own poetry the standard bearer for his often quoted philosophy on the poetry of the day: “All a poet can do today is warn. That is why the true Poets must be truthful.” (Owen in Stallworthy, 2002, p.105) His warnings still ring out to contemporary readers as a reminder that soldiers both then and now too often “die as cattle” and go unmourned “save the choirs, -/ The shrill,
demented choirs of wailing shells”. (Owen in Stallworthy, 2002, p.100) As with so many World War I soldier poets, nature appears in Owen’s work as a reminder of the cycles of life and death or as foil to the tragedy playing out on the battlefield. His poem, “Futility”, uses nature in the latter capacity, invoking the gentle, warming English sun as if it were a sort of deity that might grant resurrection to the fallen soldier so far from home.

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Move him into the sun –
Gently its touch awoke him once,
At home, whispering of fields half-sown.
Always it woke him, even in France,
Until this morning and this snow.
If anything might rouse him now
The kind old sun will know.

Think how it wakes the seeds –
Woke once the clays of a cold star.
Are limbs so dear-achieved, are sides
Full-nerved, still warm, too hard to stir?
Was it for this the clay grew tall?
- O what made fatuous sunbeams toil
To break earth’s sleep at all?
(Wilfred Owen in Stallworthy, 2002, p.114)
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The death that the wandering narrator so boldly stares down and shares the journey with in the *Songs of Travel* is one that excites the blood, linking the modern man with generations long past and with the natural world around him in which decay and death are part of a greater universal cycle of life. Death must be faced in the pursuit of adventure; life on the open road (or off the beaten track) is not for the faint-hearted and the acceptance, or even embracing, of death marks the man out from others as intrepid, daring, and more full of life for having taken on that which might end it.

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All that stirring of old instincts which at stated periods drives men out from the sounding cities to forest and plain to kill things by chemically propelled leaden pellets, the blood lust, the joy to kill – all this was Buck’s, only it was infinitely more intimate. He was ranging at the head of the pack, running the wild thing down, the living meat, to kill with his own teeth and wash his muzzle to the eyes in warm blood.
There is an ecstasy that marks the summit of life, and beyond which life cannot rise. And such is the paradox of living, this ecstasy comes when one is most alive, and it comes as a complete forgetfulness that one is alive. This ecstasy, this forgetfulness of living, comes to the artist, caught up and out of himself in a sheet of flame; it comes to the soldier, warmed on a stricken field and refusing quarter; and it came to Buck, leading the pack, sounding the old wolf-cry, straining after the food that was alive and that fled swiftly before him through the moonlight. He was sounding the deeps of his nature that were deeper than he, going back into the womb of Time. (London, 1903/R 1994, pp.42-43)
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Literature built around hunting and fishing comes into its own here, dealing as it does with the death of the prey and the possibility of the death of the hunter, either in pursuit or from the deprivation that results after losing the quarry. This delicate
balancing act is akin to a dance in which both participants (pursuer and target) are
thrown into a situation where they become almost more bonded one to the other
than each is to their own kind. The human engaged in deriving their own life
directly from what is supplied in nature becomes once again part of an ancient
cycle from which most humans have been long removed and the elements or
animals that provide shelter, sustenance, and inspiration take on a human-like
quality as they become increasingly valued by the human they are supporting.
Death and decay will come to every component of this lifescape and the timing of
each death or the individual that meets it matter very little in the larger ebb and
flow of nature’s balance.

You are killing me, fish, the old man thought. But you have a right to. Never have I seen a
greater or more beautiful, or a calmer or more noble thing than you, brother. Come on and
kill me. I do not care who kills who. (Hemingway, 1952/R 1962, p.92)

The simultaneous thrill and reverence of being immersed in and taking the
necessary elements of life directly from nature are in evidence throughout the
_Songs of Travel_. Besides long distant memories of home and hearth, and one love
affair, the journeyer in these songs keeps company solely with nature and with his
own thoughts that are inspired by the natural world around him. The opportunity it
presents is one of absolute focus and connection with the core of human nature
and the discovery that, at that core, is the overwhelming sense of being in
commune with Nature itself.

He stopped breathing then; there was only his heart, his blood, and in the following
silence the wilderness ceased to breathe also, leaning, stooping overhead with its breath
held, tremendous and impartial and waiting. (Faulkner, 1942, p.131)

**Transformational Growth**

*The transformations that occur as we grow and change pose the challenges of
thousands of lifetimes before us as well as those that are unique to our own
experience of the worlds around us and within us. Many people discover, as I did
(just like Housman and possibly Butterworth all those years ago), that society’s
norms were not developed to embrace the people that we are becoming and, while
this is far less the case now than it was during the late nineteenth and early
twentieth centuries, it can be a shock to realise that who we are is possibly
abhorrent, challenging, or uncomfortable for the people around us. As a young
teenager, I knew that my attractions lay outside the examples of the straight
relationships to which I was expected to conform. I’m fortunate to have grown up
at a time when attitudes were changing, the queer community was becoming more*
visible, and the extreme conservatism that has always faced people who choose to live outside heterosexual norms was beginning to be faced by an open-minded opposition that was expanding and growing stronger. Things were not as open as they are today but the struggles of earlier generations meant that my own burdens were lightened and that it was no longer necessary to shoulder them alone. My first relationship with another young woman was a brief shock to my parents and (I later discovered) an inspiration to those of my peers who felt the same way about their own love lives but were unable to express themselves fully at the time. My willingness to be ‘out’ at a relatively young age seemed courageous to some, ridiculous to others, and pre-emptive to those who hoped that this predilection might prove to be a phase from which I would emerge chastened and wiser about the way in which life ought to be lived. I cared very little about any of it. I embraced the open and visible homosexual lifestyle because I was in love with a woman and found more acceptance of that among members of the queer community than anywhere else. As a member of an artistic community, it hardly registered as news. Everybody there was different, and normal was the weird thing to be.

I was unprepared for the negative reaction from many of the people around me when I had a boyfriend some years later. In my quest to be accepted, I had surrounded myself with people who were so committed to a homosexual way of life that my decision to take a male partner was seen by some as defection from, and disloyalty to, a larger political movement. I found myself cut off from places where I had previously sought support and companionship. Over the next few years and through the next few relationships (with both men and women) I discovered that the true difficulty of my time was not one of belonging to one side or another but of existing in the grey areas in between, with which people of strict sexual orientation were so unfamiliar. My heterosexual marriage in my early twenties was as much a surprise to me as to anyone else. In hindsight, my misguided attempt to conform was never going to last. Years later – now in a permanent and non-monogamous relationship with a woman – I find it easier to present as being gay and traditionally married, to fit a simple box in people’s minds. In truth, I care less about a person’s gender identity than the substance of their personality, their principles, and the quality of the soul that I meet with my own when developing an intimate connection. My lovers are simply people whose
souls connect to mine. It’s an unusual life – one that, like Housman’s and possibly Butterworth’s in their own time, sets me apart; called to follow a heart that marches to a different beat, much as the narrators of these cycles are bound to the pulse of their own lives that pull them away from the crowds.

Much of the material in the poems of these songs explores the transformative process through cycles and seasons, whether of life or nature. Experiences come and go, life passes, and we are changed by the maturation, flourishing, and decay that we find in the ebb and flow of human life that is so often set against the vast or miniscule processes of the natural world around us. Central to these phases in the poetry is the kindling of desires, the exploration of passions, and the inconstancy of individual loves in lives that may span up to, or beyond, “three-score years and ten” (given as the eventual age of the narrator in Housman’s Loveliest of trees, which opens Butterworth’s Six Songs from A Shropshire Lad). In a way, these cycles are a sort of Frauenliebe und –leben for men in their exploration of men’s stages in life, the loves that they pursue, the roles that they play, and the motivations that drive them throughout life. Rudyard Kipling’s poem, If, much celebrated for its stirring representation of the many tests by which one might prove themselves to be a man, was published around the time that both Butterworth and Vaughan Williams were conceiving of, or publishing, their respective cycles. However, instead of joining the heroic call to celebrate the virtues of manhood, these cycles rather pose the challenge, ‘You may be a man, but do you really want to be one in the world in which we live?’.

There is a double transformation built into the Butterworth songs from A Shropshire Lad; that of maturing from a “lad” to a man, and also of contorting oneself to a life lived as a lie given that the heart of this man is drawn to loves that can never be fully acknowledged or openly explored. Gay and lesbian writers since Sappho have reflected on the heartbreak and torment that the denial of the heart’s true desires (or the fleeting nature of love affairs that are either never consummated or are forced to exist in the shadows) can wreak on the life of the individual. In more recent times, the writing of Jeannette Winterson has come to be known for its unflinching exploration of the intricate nuances and hidden truths of the human heart. She has her finger on the pulse of a recurring theme in this body of literature when she opens her novel, Written on the Body, with the words,
“Why is the measure of love loss?” (Winterson, 1992, p.1). In that novel – the story of a passionate but seemingly doomed love affair – she elaborates on the nature of love and the effect it can have on the person who is caught under its spell.

Love demands expression. It will not stay still, stay silent, be good, be modest, be seen and not heard, no. It will break out in tongues of praise, the high note that smashed the glass and spills the liquid. It is no conservationist love. It is a big game hunter and you are the game. A curse on this game. How can you stick at a game when the rules keep changing? (Winterson, 1992, pp.9-10)

This is especially true of “the love that dare not speak its name”, that now famous epithet for homosexual love taken from the text of a poem by Oscar Wilde’s lover Lord Alfred Douglas (1894). In a world where the rules for those whose desires are outside the norm are always changing, there can be no safety, security, or comfort in being in love. For Housman and Butterworth, living in a world where society’s rules of romantic engagement were legendarily strict, there can never have been a time when a gay man could truly let down his guard. With the advent of the Labouchere Amendment (mentioned above), any man would have had to have taken extra care in his dealings with others of his sex. But love has its own rules and finds its own way to be expressed. In her memoir, Why Be Happy When You Could Be Normal? (2011), Jeanette Winterson explores her own coming to maturity; a painful experience that provided much of the material for her groundbreaking novel, Oranges Are Not The Only Fruit (1985/R 1997). Here, she recounts one of the last exchanges she has with her mother before having to leave home as a teenager:

‘I’ll go then…’ I said.
She didn’t answer, I left the room. I walked down the dark, narrow lobby, the coats on their pegs. Nothing to say. I was at the front door. I heard her behind me. I turned.
‘Jeanette, will you tell me why?’
‘What why?’
‘You know what why…’
But I don’t know what why … what I am … why I don’t please her. What she wants.
Why I am not what she wants. What I want or why. But there is something I know:
‘When I am with her I am happy. Just happy.’
She nodded. She seemed to understand and I thought, really, for that second, that we would talk, that we would be on the same side of the glass wall. I waited.
She said, ‘Why be happy when you could be normal?’ (Winterson, 2011, pp.113-114)

The transformational process of the Songs of Travel is one that takes the hero further from human contact and deeper into the heart of Nature that acts as companion, mirror, and source of solace, as he explores himself as much as he explores the world around him. Like our wandering horn player in Winterreise, the
character that Vaughan Williams creates in his selection and juxtaposition of Stevenson’s poems becomes intertwined with Nature, depending on it and referring to it as he would another human. Nature’s transcendent power to transform boy into man has been a theme since the earliest stories of humanity, and it continues to fascinate us today. Although traditional tribal rites of passage - when boys would be tested against the wilderness as they crossed over into manhood - have largely left our modern world, we live in a society that has been constructed around the myth of masculinity being something that can be won from Nature, like some kind of prize. From the story of Jesus Christ being tested in the wilderness, to the reality television adventurers of the modern day, there is a kind of reverence for the man who can face his demons in the wild (whether spiritual or material) and who returns to pass on the wisdom gained through the experience to the rest of us. However, there are some for whom the role model of the man alone, discovering himself in the wild, is less a glorious ideal than a terrible warning that we have lost our way and lost our humanity in the societies we have built up around ourselves. For these people, the norms and constructs of modern society represent a kind of trap in which we have colluded in our own oppression and sedation; the opium of the people is not only religion (as Marx saw it) but almost all of the modern world around which our lives revolve. The desire to remove oneself from this perceived ruse of modern living, is often viewed by others with fear and condemnation. Surely there must be something deeply wrong with someone who has no desire to fit in, who cannot find the strength to contort themselves into a life lived in one place under a common system. There have long been those who, in response to this feeling of being an ill fit in this turbulent world are drawn “past the edge of the known world, by nothing more than a hunger of the spirit, a yearning of such queer intensity that it beggars the modern imagination.” (Krakauer, 1996/R 2007, p.97)

Vaughan Williams’ traveller in the Songs of Travel has the air of one of these seeker-travellers, and his trajectory is one followed by many who find themselves unable to reconcile their personal motivations with the culture around them. They walk out into the world, turning their backs on families, jobs, and seemingly full and happy lives. One of the most well-known stories from recent times of this kind of transformation is that of young American student, Chris McCandless. Disillusioned with the world around him, and fuelled by an imagination full of
writers like Thoreau, London, Tolstoy, and Pasternak (the quote that heads this chapter is one that he had underlined in his own copy of Dr. Zhivago that was found with his remains), McCandless gave away his savings and his possessions and took to the open road, intent on having meaningful experiences that would illuminate the human condition in harmony with Nature. In his book on McCandless’ doomed adventures, Into the Wild, Jon Krakauer explores not only the journey taken by Chris himself, but also the siren call to test oneself against adversity that draws so many young men into jeopardy.

It is hardly unusual for a young man to be drawn to a pursuit considered reckless by his elder; engaging in risky behaviour is a rite of passage in our culture no less than in most others. Danger has always held a certain allure. That, in large part, is why so many teenagers drive too fast and drink too much and take too many drugs, why it has always been so easy for nations to recruit young men to go to war. It can be argued that youthful derring-do is in fact evolutionarily adaptive, a behaviour encoded in our genes. McCandless, in his fashion, merely took risk-taking to its logical extreme. He had a need to test himself in ways, as he was fond of saying, “that mattered”. He possessed grand – some would say grandiose – spiritual ambitions. According to the moral absolutism that characterizes McCandless’ beliefs, a challenge in which a successful outcome is assured isn’t a challenge at all. (Krakauer, 1996/R 2007, p.181).

Far from condemning Chris for the simple mistakes that eventually cost him his life, Krakauer invites the reader to explore the pure and heartfelt convictions that sent him out into the world alone, and that remained with him until his death in the Alaskan wilderness. When he reached the place where, four months later, he would lose his life to starvation, Chris scrawled an exuberant manifesto on the walls of the bus that would be his final home:

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TWO YEARS HE WALKS THE EARTH. NO PHONE, NO POOL, NO PETS, NO CIGARETTES. ULTIMATE FREEDOM. AN EXTREMIST. AN AESTHETIC VOYAGER WHOSE HOME IS THE ROAD. ESCAPED FROM ATLANTA. THOU SHALT NOT RETURN, ‘CAUSE THE “WEST IS THE BEST.” AND NOW AFTER TWO RAMBLING YEARS COMES THE FINAL AND GREATEST ADVENTURE. THE CLIMACTIC BATTLE TO KILL THE FALSE BEING WITHIN AND VICTORIOUSLY CONCLUDE THE SPIRITUAL PILGRIMAGE. TEN DAYS AND NIGHTS OF FREIGHT TRAINS AND HITCHHIKING BRING HIM TO THE GREAT WHITE NORTH. NO LONGER TO BE POISONED BY CIVILIZATION HE FLEES, AND WALKS ALONE UPON THE LAND TO BECOME LOST IN THE WILD.
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(McCandless in Krakauer, 1996/R 2007, p.162 – capitals and underscoring as in original)

Even in his last days, when he knew well that he was dying, Chris’ final self-portrait photograph shows him smiling and holding a sign expressing his thanks for the happiness in his life. However, like our journeyman’s final thought of having both lived and loved before his death in Vaughan Williams’ Songs of Travel, it is hard not to wonder if Chris’ determination to turn his back on society led him to make a sacrifice he regretted before he died, when reading that one of his last notes to himself in the margins of his copy of Dr. Zhivago read:
“HAPPINESS ONLY REAL WHEN SHARED.” (McCandless in Krakauer, 1996/R 2007, p. 188)

Performance Landscape
The emotional preparation for this final programme begins before I approach the music. I have yet to settle down to my own work in the studio on these pieces when I am unexpectedly hurled into their thematic world in my own life. As I travel to London following the second recital, it becomes apparent that I will, in many ways, walk the road through these new works alone; in my own way experiencing the solitary wild landscape that is the backdrop to Stevenson’s wandering works and the lonely isolation among the crowds that seeps through the Housman texts.

Stephen, more stereotypically English than most of the Englishmen I know (although Australian by birth), is around every street corner here and I am constantly reminded that I have a new collaborative relationship to invest in & build up at the eleventh hour, albeit one that will be familiar. Leanne and I will only put the programme together shortly before we perform it and so I am taking this journey without a pianist collaborator at my side throughout. I’ve also chosen to prepare and perform this programme over the summer semester, during which time Lisa is taking a well-deserved break, which means that I will be taking myself through this music without the guidance of a teacher. While in London, I take the opportunity to work with a coach who has also been a very dear friend and mentor over almost fifteen years. Like most of the other long established classical music professionals who hear about this programme, he can’t begin to understand why I would insist on performing these songs that do not belong to women (as far as the classical vocal patriarchy is concerned). The idea that this recital is at best a foolish waste of time (at worst, an insult to the composers and their output) comes from both women and men who are leaders in my music world, although practitioners of my own generation and people outside classical music networks struggle to understand what all the fuss is about. News of my singing this programme is either greeted with amusement and jokes about gender confusion, or irritation and acerbic comments about my ineligibility to approach these works; it seems that I cannot be taken seriously, respected, or expected to create a worthwhile musical experience by those who have gone ahead of me on the musical path. So I am reminded that I am alone in this journey ideologically too, without a musical mentor who is invested in me or interested in what I might make
of these songs. My selection of music that I love for its own sake and is a good fit with both my research topic and my voice is seen as a rebellion against the status quo instead of a valid and interesting repertoire choice.

As far as I am aware, women have never recorded either the Vaughan Williams or the Butterworth cycles in their entirety, although some recordings do exist of individual songs. This seems to be a peculiarity of English repertoire. Recordings have been made by both men and women of all the other cycles in this research, and of other famous cycles such as Schumann’s Dichterliebe or Berlioz’ Les Nuits d’Été. This, to me is a source of much regret; there are a number of extraordinary female English song interpreters, such as Kathleen Ferrier and Janet Baker, whose musical and interpretive gifts might have been well-matched with both of these sets of songs. Due to the inaccessible nature to non-native speakers of many sounds in the English language, these songs have also not (to my knowledge) been recorded by any singers other than native English speakers, making them the preserve of a very select few performers. Also, although they do exist in other keys, they are very rarely sung by tenors, making these songs almost exclusively performed by English-speaking baritones.

Two recordings featuring well-known British baritones have been influential in forming my current interpretation of these songs; the 1995 recording by Bryn Terfel and pianist Malcolm Martineau (Vaughan Williams, 1904 & 1906/ R 1960 and Butterworth, 1911 & 1912), and the 2003 recording by Christopher Maltman and pianist Roger Vignoles (Vaughan Williams, 1904 & 1906/ R 1960 and Butterworth, 1911 & 1912). I’ve been aware of the songs for a long time and have heard them performed very often by student singers. Despite their many layers of complexity, English songs are often given to beginner singers, perhaps due to their apparent simplicity or regular use of folk-song melodies. In my experience, the complexity of these songs is hugely underestimated; having now performed them myself and experienced them through the recordings of seasoned professionals, I am astonished by this common practice. The recordings mentioned above exemplify both the depth of interpretation and height of musical mastery that can come across when this seemingly simple repertoire is approached by accomplished performers. Singers and pianists in both recordings are given many opportunities to display their substantial abilities and all the artists rise to Vaughan
Williams’ challenge to “discover the fine gold underneath” (Vaughan Williams in Manning, 2008, p. 46) these songs from a genre that many musicians consider to be beneath the advanced practitioner.

My own decision to perform these songs has been met with mixed response (as noted above). While my peers might not condemn me for being a woman and daring to sing these songs, which so many seem to believe belong solely to men, they have been more likely to belong to that category of musicians who see little value in the pursuit of English song. For my part, the opportunity to sing in my own language is irresistible; I can finally fully express every nuance of the language with the confidence that I am not misunderstanding anything or may be unaware of the wider connotations and implications of particular words because of my lack of fluency. I find the use of folk song form and melody enjoyably unpretentious, and simple melodic constructions free me artistically to make my own interpretation without being hampered by constant questions of correctness of style or technical delivery. Janet Baker, speaking below about Kathleen Ferrier singing unaccompanied folk song, captures my philosophy on the joy of singing music whose simplicity can open worlds for both performers and audiences.

The most often played extract is the unaccompanied folk song ‘Blow the Wind Southerly’ and to me it encapsulates her entirely. You’re getting the glory of this human sound, her genius with words and the way she makes them as a Lancastrian, that roundness of vowel, the way she sounds the words is her, it just describes her so exactly, the simplicity of the person and this directness — there’s nothing like the directness of unaccompanied singing to reach the heart. (Janet Baker in Jackson, 2004)

My desire to perform these songs is not entirely untouched by my own views on gender equality. Classical music is a field that retains many imbalances between the genders, which have long been left behind by other industries. The idea that these songs belong only to men, and that women would do this repertoire and its creators a disservice by singing them, is indicative to me of many of the entrenched attitudes that badly need to be changed before we can achieve the stated goal of many classical music institutions and organisations to become more relevant to contemporary audiences and societies. Firstly, it reminds me that women are still second-class citizens in the classical music world; the paucity of female conductors and composers speaks volumes to that situation. Even in the world of classical voice, which seems to be ruled over by women in the form of the idealised prima donna or diva, women’s voices, minds, and bodies are largely
managed and directed by men in positions of power and influence. I’ve even been told that my choice of this repertoire is merely an indication that I want to be a man; an astounding but all too common reaction to women who seek more than what has been deemed to be allowable feminine activity by an industry with strict and conservative ideas about gender.

To recognize how completely we have ignored female masculinity as a culture, consider the following questions: Why is there no word for the opposite of “emascualtion”? Why is there no parallel concept to “effeminacy”? (In fact, these two words mean exactly the same thing!) Why shouldn’t a woman get in touch with her masculinity? Why does female masculinity remain so much a stigma that many women, even lesbians, will do almost anything to avoid the label “butch”? Why are we comfortable thinking about men as mothers, but we never consider women as fathers? Gender, it seems, is reversible only in one direction, and this must surely have to do with the immense social power that accumulates around masculinity. Masculinity, one must conclude, has been reserved for people with male bodies and has been actively denied to people with female bodies. And this is not to say that all things being equal, all female-bodied people would desire masculinity, only that the protection of masculinity from women bears examination. (Halberstam, 1998, pp.269-270)

That women may even be doing composers and poets a disservice by daring to approach these songs highlights the mediated nature of performers’ relationships with long dead creators of their source material. It is rare for young singers (I cannot speak for other musicians) to be encouraged to explore their own personal connections to, or feelings about, the people who so long ago wrote the things we still sing today. Anointed experts in publication, performance, or instruction are held up as gatekeepers to the thoughts and feelings of these uncontactable creative individuals. Whether they themselves would object to women singing their songs is unknowable; today’s experts make that decision on their behalf.

A woman’s issues of soul cannot be treated by carving her into a more acceptable form as defined by an unconscious culture, not can she be bent into a more intellectually acceptable shape by those who claim to be the sole bearers of consciousness. No, that is what has already caused millions of women who began as strong and natural powers to become outsiders in their own cultures. Instead, the goal must be the retrieval and succor for women’s beauteous and natural psychic form.

…

When we lose touch with the instinctive psyche, we live in a semi-destroyed state and images and powers that are natural to the feminine are not allowed full development. When a woman is cut away from her basic source, she is sanitized, and her instincts and natural life cycles are lost, subsumed by the culture, or by the intellect or the ego – one’s own or those belonging to others. (Pinkola Estés, 1992, pp. 6 and 10)

Performance Inspiration

Just under three weeks before the performance, I travel to Newcastle to spend some time preparing the recital with Leanne. She has broken her foot in an accident and there is some question about whether or not she will be able to use the pedals of the piano and play the concert. However, she wants to try and (with
Stephen agreeing to be a backup for her if she needs to withdraw) we begin to work together on the music. With very little time available to us and so many years having passed since our last performance together, we are both nervous about how this will work. Stephen and I had the luxury of over a year to work on Winterreise and a number of months to work on Kindertotenlieder and the Songs and Dances of Death. Leanne and I will have only days (six in Newcastle and one rehearsal in the venue the day before the performance). Although we know each other incredibly well, our respective performance abilities and habits are not familiar, as they had become between Stephen and I. What we do share is a deep and lasting bond, and immense love and compassion for one another which, we hope, will steer us through the challenges ahead and guide us intuitively toward becoming a performing unit in this incredibly short time.

The first days are difficult and exhausting for us both but by day three we are already beginning to find each other instinctively and to show signs of the union that I had so carefully developed when working with Stephen. The advantage of working with Leanne is that we are absolute equals and the exchange of musical, poetic, and emotional ideas flows easily between the two of us. Also, the love that is the cornerstone of our relationship helps us to support one another through the various challenges we both face, while each maintaining complete faith in the other as we strive toward our common goal. I can’t thank my lucky stars enough that Leanne was able to join me for this performance; the thought of doing this with a stranger is completely abhorrent. I would never have been able to open up so quickly and make myself so totally vulnerable as I allowed myself to be with Stephen and as I am naturally able to be with Leanne. The further I go along this road, the more I believe that it is the vulnerability that is the key to creating true union and connection both with my collaborative pianists and with my audiences. Without it, I’m sure I might give a perfectly proficient performance with a technically brilliant pianist but it would never be the same. Now that I have felt and seen the benefits of that depth of connection in my artistic work, I can’t imagine approaching the stage without it.

My time in Newcastle is over too soon and the performance is suddenly only days away. Leanne and I are both very stressed. Despite a final rehearsal in Newcastle that inspires us both with confidence, we are worried about having only one run in
the venue before the performance itself. I soon discover that what we lack between
the two of us is an anchor – a solid, calm presence; part of the the great gift that
Stephen always was to me - and without it we are liable to both lose our heads
with worry and stress. Performance day arrives and I find myself wishing that
there had been more time in which to do the long, slow work I valued so much on
my other programmes. But there is nothing for it; today’s the day and – for better
or worse – the performance will just have to go ahead. As the guests gather, my
heart begins to pound in my chest and I try to push my anxiety out of my mind.
When we begin the presentation, I can hear myself talking too quickly, I forget the
speech I’m making, and my head feels heavy and over-full of everything I’ve had
to learn in a hurry. I bring myself back to the room, to the poetry and the music,
and to the audience who are here to listen. Things feel unsettled for me (vocally
and emotionally) and I can sense Leanne’s tension from the piano as well. In my
panic to fix things that I think are going wrong, I pull her with me through
unrehearsed interpretive decisions and I make mistakes that make me cringe. I’m
painfully aware that the high standard to which I hold myself is not being met and,
as the evening draws to a close, I beg some higher power to open up the ground
beneath me so I can escape. However, after the performance, a number of
audience members approach me with tears in their eyes and beautiful words of
thanks on their lips, and I am reminded that although I may not have delivered the
vocal performance I had hoped for, I was able to do something that I always
profess to think is much more important: people are moved, they feel touched by
what Leanne and I were able to give them, and they have opened themselves to
places and emotions that they rarely encounter. While I couldn’t impress my own
ego, I did speak to their hearts. And isn’t that what I’ve been trying to do all along
anyway?

These song cycles inhabit a world of performance that is full of compassion and
warmth, touched with the bitterness of regret and loss, and underpinned by
immense hope and faith that the world is not bereft of goodness. Many performers
from a huge variety of genres and styles offer me inspiration. Three performers
from the worlds of folk music, spoken-word poetry, and stand-up comedy have
been examples to me of truly communicating from the heart in these ways and
speaking directly to the heart of their audiences.
Folk musician, Mercedes Sosa, was introduced to me by a guitarist friend through her live acoustic performance with a guitarist in Switzerland (Sosa, 1984/R 2005). Her singing in that performance, with only the guitar as accompaniment (and the occasional drumbeat played herself), reflects what Janet Baker had to say about Kathleen Ferrier above. Her heart and soul come shining through in her unpretentious and sincere delivery of the songs she is singing. In her performance of the song *Gracias a la vida*, the humility of a woman who had led such a tumultuous existence (she was once arrested onstage in her homeland of Argentina during the years of military rule) giving thanks for life, is truly moving; the creator of the song, Chilean poet Violeta Parra, committed suicide not long after writing this serenade to life’s goodness. Mercedes also connects with her audience by speaking to them between songs. At one point in her performance, she tells them that poets are prophets; it’s a philosophy that I share with her and that gives insight into how her simple delivery is underscored by her faith in the words of these great thinkers and creators.

Spoken-word poetry’s direct conversation with the audience mirrors the process inherent in recital singing. While recital audiences might be more silent than those of great spoken-word poets, whose best performances will inspire empathetic outbursts of support from audience members, the two disciplines share a common ground in their quest to illuminate the human condition and hunt out the truth of human experience. In her 2011 TED talk (Kay, 2011), Sarah Kay performs two poems that achieve both of those goals and showcase her gift as a courageous observer, unafraid to confront the bitterness of reality but unaffected by the despair that might accompany the realisations she shares. Her naturally optimistic spirit is laid bare for her audience to critique or embrace, as they will, and her pride and confidence is tempered with an admirable vulnerability as she shares her fears and hopes in equal measure. Her artless way of winning over her audience with charm and simple truths is both heartwarming and inspirational, and an example of a state of being onstage that would make a welcome change to many austere classical performances.

Stand-up comedy again provides a template for genuine and seemingly spontaneous conversation with an audience, as it so often has throughout this performance/research journey (although, in reality, each comedy performance is
as carefully crafted as any classical recital). Comedian, Richard Pryor became well-known during the 1970s and 1980s not only for his performances on stage and screen but also for his struggles with drug and alcohol addiction. In his 1982 performance, *Live on the Sunset Strip* (Pryor, 1982/R 2005), Pryor is disarming candid about his experiences, his shortcomings, and their deleterious effects on his loved ones. In the same performance, he relates the story of his recent travels to Africa and his realisation that people of all races are all equal and that hatred from within or outside an ethnic community is equally damaging in the wounds it inflicts on humanity. He shares this life-altering change in his attitude without guile and his sincerity in expressing a deepened love for humanity and for the audience gathered to see him connects easily with the crowd who embrace this moment of serious truth from an artist who is there, ostensibly, to make them laugh. That audiences are hungry for honest and open communication that grapples head-on with the struggles we all face is clear in all three performances. With their presence both on and off the stage, the audiences and performers in all three instances are clearly bound together in an experience that all are taking part in creating and altering.

*In a masterclass with an internationally recognised collaborative pianist, I was once told that a performance must cost you something if it is to be deeply felt not only by you but also by your audience. This last performance cost me so much – much more than I can say here – and perhaps this is how the people present were able to feel it as deeply as I had hoped. I only know that, in the aftermath, I am completely drained.*

*Two days after the performance, I am riding on a trail through the bush with my horse, Romeo. His gait is faster than the other horses with us and, as we pull away forward and leave everybody behind, the steady rhythm of his hoofbeats is punctuated only by the sounds of his breath and the rustle and chirp of unseen life in the trees that surround us. It almost seems that I am alone on this path with him, pushing ahead into the unknown, away from everything that I so much want to forget. Ahead to what, I wonder? Does it matter? Probably not. With his ears pricked up and his head held high, Romeo’s only thought is to move forward into the world to discover what might be around the bend. He freezes suddenly to stare at a leaf, spinning from a low hanging branch, but the threat of death-by-leaf soon*
passes from his mind and we carry on. He never dwells on things that shake his confidence or spook him; by the time the threat has been registered, it is already beginning to leave his sphere of reference. I look ahead at the path unfolding before us and pray for the resolve to face life in the same brave way. Shaken, but not yet broken, the only thing to do is continue forward and find out what is waiting for me around the next bend in my own path.
CONCLUSION

After a book I am emotionally exhausted. If you are not you have not transferred the emotion completely to the reader. Anyway that is the way it works with me. (Hemingway in Phillips, 1984, p.39)

After all the experiences during this journey – the joys, the heartaches, the lessons, the successes and the failures – I have come away with three major discoveries that have changed or deepened the way in which I approach my art and the people with whom and for whom I am making it. These discoveries have also indicated a path ahead for future research directions that my fellow performer/researchers and I might follow, and affirmed for me that there is value in what I have been pursuing, not only for the academic and performance community but for all kinds of creative explorers and for the community at large. These experiences give me the assurance that there are new ways in which the world can be understood, and that these can very often be found through old, supposedly anachronistic music made by and for people from eras vastly different to our own.

The first discovery is the idea that valid inspiration for music-making and classical song interpretation can come from any field capable of stimulating a creative response. This has given me the freedom to fully embrace all the facets of who I am and where I come from in my quest to create meaningful experiences in performance. It is as if permission has finally been given (though I am at a loss to say who gave it or why I felt it necessary to wait for it to be given) to embrace everything that my body, mind, and soul have to offer my audiences. Drawing from various fields of performance, literature, and life experience, has allowed me to feel whole in performance; not merely a woman in possession of a voice, but also an intellect and a heart that can be of value to a classical recital experience.

The second is coming to increasingly recognise the value of vulnerability and authenticity to my work on the recital stage as this journey has progressed. While my intuition on the subject had led me to believe that these qualities must be vital ingredients to successful connection with audiences and fellow musicians, it has been only during research for this project that I have had this viewpoint affirmed.
by both expert writing and inquiry, and by my own experiences in performance. Equally important (foundational, in fact, for this idea) has been the discovery of how and why humans are so hardwired for connection; why we not only need each other emotionally, but how authentic, sincere, and loving connection can be more widely recognised as essential to meaningful music-making.

The third discovery has been Relational Cultural Theory’s (RCT) potential relevance to, and compatibility with, the field of performance music. This theory’s philosophies seem to have a way of illuminating the work we undertake as musicians in so many capacities, especially for singers who are almost never completely alone in performance (and during which time we still have an audience and creators to consider). It is, of course, true, that no human activity exists in a vacuum but our industry’s general emphasis on individuals and their achievements can overshadow the fact that, although we may spend many hours alone in practice rooms, we are never truly making music without the input of some other human. This includes input into the creation of the music or instrument, guidance given in developing our craft, artistic and personal companionship onstage, and the attention and recognition they have waiting for us when we perform. Popular music performer Sting, speaking here about the deepened sense of spirituality in truly moving artistry, parallels my own thinking around the importance of a higher degree of relational preparation before performance on the recital stage can approach transcendence through connection using the catalysts of poetry and music.

Real musicians, there's a spiritual component to what they do. It's got nothing to do with worldly success. Their music is much more of an inner journey. Any other success is just cream on the cake. There's this idea that you can go on American Idol and suddenly become a star, but you may bypass the spiritual work that you have to do to get there, and if you bypass that then your success will be wafer thin. (Sting in Friesen, 2013)

The work of RCT researchers also builds on that from the topics of vulnerability and authenticity to remind us that we all grow through and toward connection, and by building growth fostering relationships with one another (Jordan, 2008, p.2).

Given my productive experience in pairing RCT with classical recital singing, future research fusion of RCT and music could have much to offer both communities of inquiry. Performer/researchers from other areas of the creative industries might also find some resonance with their work in the body of writing
around RCT. Using this psychological vantage point for the creative work underway in a multitude of disciplines could have far reaching effects for both arts and psychology researchers and practitioners. The pairing of these two seemingly disparate fields of inquiry might also spur future researchers to similar bisociative processes in their own search for new meaning. Koestler’s (1964/R 1989) book, *The Act of Creation*, coined the term bisociation; a term which he says “points to the independent, autonomous character of the matrices which are brought into contact in the creative act, whereas associative thought operates among members of a single pre-existing matrix.” (Koestler, 1964/R 1989, p.656) Rather than the associative act of finding inspiration from other artistic forms, as I also did during this research, the bisociative act of combining RCT with music facilitated for me a synthesis of separate worlds which, in their coming together, was the catalyst for the creative act of exploring the relationships around the classical vocal recital stage. This is not to say, of course, that associative acts lack value; I gained many insights from my associative explorations. However, the bisociative combination of RCT with classical vocal performance made an enormous difference to my perspective on my art and my intentions for future performance activity.

These discoveries and the related future research possibilities could have interesting ramifications for classical music and its practitioners. Western classical music struggles to compete for attention from wider communities and the funding bodies that decide where support will be lent in facilitating artistic consumption for those communities. It is hoped that the ideas presented here and the exploration undertaken throughout my research process may inform industry participants, researchers, and wider communities on the relevance of classical performance to the contemporary human experience, and reinforce the links between communities and the musical institutions that exist to serve them. In lowering the veil of mysticism around the processes inherent in creating classical music performances, performers might find new and deeper ways to relate to and connect with their audiences, thus reinforcing their place in society as facilitators of valuable and cathartic emotional experience. By strengthening human connections in this way, all stakeholders in classical music may discover the true worth inherent in the art form and the importance of its role in our ever changing and increasingly complex lives.
Inspiration
The decision to observe the way in which I cast a net around myself in search for what might inspire me in my interpretations led to some interesting discoveries. I leaned far less than I expected on the performances of other classical musicians, although I did take in a number of key recordings and found myself absorbing these renditions numerous times during my own periods of preparation. At times, the things that classical performers had to say about their approach to art and life in their writing were equally inspiring to me in building my own interpretations of the song cycles in this study. Literature and poetry came to the fore, confirming what I had always known about myself and my relationship to the written word. My love of text is one of the things that makes me so particularly passionate about art song (with its densely crafted lyrical aspect) and writing this exegesis has been an enjoyable task as I have faced the challenge of putting words of my own around experiences that have been so deeply influenced and inspired by the words of others. The discovery of inspiration from performers from complementary performance disciplines that are similar to recital singing has been an absolute thrill for me. As a singer who is more interested in work that is presented in concert, I have often felt like an outsider; a stranger in a world of singers that seems to revolve around the operatic stage and where art song and oratorio repertoire are widely considered to be things that a singer should dabble with on the side of an operatic career. Suddenly, I felt surrounded by a community of people who performed in the way I wanted to perform, were passionate about the things that fired me up, and shared with me a deep conviction about exploring universal truths of life from their own, unique perspectives. The ability to investigate my own perspective and draw on the experiences in my life to illuminate my interpretations of the music at hand was equally thrilling and allowed me to acknowledge that I might have something of value to say as an artist that could only be said by me.

How often are we robbed of our ecstasy by trusting implicitly in external authority and negating our internal wisdom. And how often we … have been robbed. We wobble along obeying the edicts from visible or invisible judges, negating the closer truth in our own bodies or minds. … We yield our wills and our imaginations to ‘experts’, both visible and invisible, and pretend that only the experts have god-given powers of perception. We forget the legitimacy of our own knowing. (Ristad, 1982, p.194)

Classical Recitalists
Those artists who have gone ahead of me on the musical path and have left
recordings, interviews, or writings as markers of where they have been professionally and personally, have provided guidance on my journey and affirmation of the ideas that come to me instinctively about how I feel about my chosen world of performance. Tenor Ian Bostridge’s statement that “a jumble of reading and looking and listening feeds into my work as a singer” (Bostridge, 2011, p.94) or soprano Galina Vishnevskaya’s declaration that, “The performance of such roles [as Mussorgsky’s *Songs and Dances of Death*] demands that the artist bare himself” (Vishnevskaya, 1984, p.267) validate my instincts about how to approach my own interpretations of works of which both have made well known recordings. Besides the obvious inspiration of the high level of musical and emotional interpretation displayed by singers and pianists in recordings I have admired, an artist’s personal commitment to communicating their unique perspective through their art has been something that has drawn me toward some performers more than others. Janet Baker’s statement about Kathleen Ferrier’s approach to her artistry resonates with me and acts as a beacon as I continue on my own artistic journey.

One of the most important and, perhaps, difficult things performers have to learn is coming through all the technical years of struggling to refine what they’re doing, learning – it’s a great learning process – and eventually they reach a point where they’re pretty well established in the way they’re going to work and at that point it’s a very interesting moment in their lives. Some people walk through that final door, which takes a lot of courage because you are actually revealing yourself as an individual human being “This is what I have to say. I’m giving you this music but I’m saying it in the only way I can which is totally individual” and somebody like Ferrier had that kind of courage to a tremendous degree. (Janet Baker in Jackson, 2004)

**Literature and Poetry**
Great works of literature and poetry have long been my companions and in this project, combined with notable works of memoir and historical research, they have provided a fount of ideas, imagination, and images from the pens of many great thinkers and explorers of the human experience. As I have worked toward finding an engaging and immediate means of expressing myself and my convictions in both writing and performance, the works of these poets and authors have (as with the statements from the singers quoted above) provided both guidance and validation. In areas where I have had personal experience, these poets and authors (with their own examples of self-reflexive writing) have given me the courage to speak honestly from my perspective and have allowed me to back up ideas that might otherwise have lacked the foundation of being more than intuition alone. In fields where I have lacked experience, their insights have
illuminated intellectually and (particularly important to the performance aspect of my work) have stimulated both my imagination and empathy, making it possible for me to perform from a place of confidence and awareness, and giving me the gift of worlds beyond my own to add to the perspective I bring to each musical work. They remind me that there is a world of output from the broader communities of both creativity and intellectual inquiry that is available to lend the colours of many lived experiences to any future performances or writing, either of these works and in this field or in any performed or written work I find myself approaching as I continue to develop as a performer and writer.

“The hardest thing in the world is to write straight honest prose on human beings. First you have to know the subject; then you have to know how to write. Both take a lifetime to learn…” (Hemingway in Phillips, 1984, p. 26)

Complementary Disciplines
The idea that performers from disciplines outside the world of classical music might be more connected to my work than those from within it has been a hard one to sell to supervisors and colleagues, although it has always made perfect sense to me. As I approach the end of this work, I see myself as far more a part of a community of artists who speak from the stage directly to an audience than any other sphere of creative industry.

They appear to dispense with illusion — no sets or costumes, just a singer and a pianist — but they are not necessarily more real for it. Seemingly transparent, they are also opaque. They don’t offer a singer unadorned, as many claim, but rather demand the most subtle and difficult kind of performance: the performance of self. (Zachary Woolfe on lieder singers – Woolfe, 2013)

The work of jazz and folk singers, spoken-word poets and monologue performers, and (most especially) stand-up comedians has been more than enlightening – it has provided a template for how I hope to be able to perform with honesty, raw emotion, and unflinching courage to say (through my own art form and the way I present it) the things that I feel need to be said. I feel just the same as comedian Richard Pryor when he says that “there's something in me that's dying to express itself”, and these performers, particularly comedians who share so much of their own life experience onstage, show the courage I hope to be able to achieve when they unashamedly take the parts of themselves that are dying to be expressed (no matter how awkward, or embarrassing, or unusual), allow them to express themselves as fully as possible, and invite audiences to share in that process.

"It's about gathering up all the knowledge and experience you've gathered up to now to help you dive into the things you don't know. I use poetry to help me work through the
things I don't understand but I show up to each new poem with a backpack full of everywhere else that I've been.” (Kay, 2011)

**Life Experience**
The examples of the performers mentioned above encouraged me in my own decision to actively explore the experiences in my own life that connect me to the repertoire in this project. Using the catalyst of the autoethnographic written method and being aware that these life experiences would be shared in black and white with people who might normally never know such things about me, I began a process (gradual at first, and then more immediate and intense) of peeling back layers of self and constructed facades to discover the genesis of my interpretive impulses. Internally, the result has been life changing; I feel unable to comment on the external manifestation (either in my writing or my performances) of this exploration. In a society where the title of “artist” is recognised as belonging to a person has something of value to say through their creative output, the idea that I might be able to be one of those people purely because I have the desire to express myself in my chosen field was completely alien. However, I forged ahead and gave as much of myself as I possibly could (both in this paper and onstage), and found the process incredibly enlightening, hugely cathartic, and immensely rewarding. It challenged me to live up to the principles of honesty and authenticity that I espouse, showed me that I have a perspective rich in material from which to draw interpretive ideas (and, hopefully, the ability to communicate that), and heightened my curiosity about the journeys my collaborative pianists were taking with me and how we might combine our respective stimuli from our lives into a unified vision of the musical and poetic work at hand.

All of these sources of inspiration contributed to a well-spring of background information from which I was able to draw at any moment during performance. Once the music was learned and rehearsed into my voice, I had a wealth of ideas, images, memories, and emotions swirling in the back of my mind, ready at any moment to swing forward into focus to make a connection with the material and then, through me, a connection with my collaborators and audiences.

The mental effort the actor [or recital performer] must make in taking the printed word and transforming it into the spoken [or sung] word is to still the clamor of the rational brain and give the word time for the image of print to dissolve and transmute into the nonverbal images, feelings, states of being, desires, and memories that lie beneath. A word or phrase or a sentence is like a pebble that, when thrown into the pool of the body-mind, sets up ripples that disturb the waters. The waters? Physical, sensory, sensual, and emotional energies. Then, when the energies become insistent and need to be released, the
water turns to vibration and becomes voice. The nonverbal now has access to words, readymade – retained and shaped by the brain but not controlled by it. (Linklater, 2006, p.345)

Vulnerability and Authenticity

Being able to engage in, and fully use, the material described above only came about through my decision to make myself as vulnerable as possible in order to access a truly authentic kind of expression in performance. As I write this now, having completed the journeys of preparation and performance around which this writing is centred, I am convinced that vulnerability is the key for me to being able to engage meaningfully with audiences, collaborators, and even the repertoire itself. I also feel that only a completely open and honest intention and sense of purpose will lead to my being able to create a product of integrity and authenticity that will allow me to get the most out of my performance relationships. What the poets and composers of these works were exploring was life; real, messy, complicated, dirty life. I believe that it is only by bringing the most whole and real version of myself to my artistic work – uncomplicated by perfectionism and unguarded by fear and shame - that I feel I can truly create moving experiences and deeply connect with those around me. This puts me in a hugely vulnerable position. Lewis, Amini, and Lannon’s A General Theory of Love (2000) and Brené Brown’s (2010 and 2012) work on shame resilience and vulnerability have been invaluable in helping me to understand how and why genuine and open pathways of connection are so important to all people, and in opening the way for my own thought processes on the implications this might have for classical vocal recital performers.

There can be no doubt that all humans are born with an innate need for connection, and with a need for that connection to be as genuine, warm, and loving as possible. Given that art song often deals with extremely difficult emotional themes (such as the themes of this research project), recital performers are asking our audiences to trust us and to connect with us as we open them up to some of their most fragile emotional states. In order for them to be able to do that, we may need to lead from onstage with an example of wholeheartedness that proves to our audiences and our collaborators that not only are we worthy of the trust that we are requesting but also that we are able to hold them with loving connection while they go through whatever emotions might come to them in their
experience of this music and poetry. In doing so, we might find value in being assured of our own resilience as we take on the task of technically executing our craft to the best of our ability, accept the peaks and troughs that come with live performance (which is at the whim of so many variables), and deal with repertoire containing thematic material that may be confronting, upsetting, or deeply moving. Our courage and passion can support us (not to mention our audiences and collaborators) through each performance journey; those two things inspire many of us to perform in the first place and could carry us through our performances and inspire us to search for new depths of meaning and understanding that we might then communicate to those around us through our art.

**Connection**
The importance of warm, loving human connection to all of our lives cannot be overestimated; simply put, we would die without it (Lewis, Amini, and Lannon, 2000, pp.68-70). The sense of warmth and connection that we are able to impart to our audiences in the recital hall can be palpable. Given the nature of the communicative dialogue that is happening between those onstage and those in the audience, and the leap of faith we may be asking our audiences to take in trusting us with sensitive emotional experiences, we have both an opportunity and a responsibility to do as much as we can to reinforce that bond in the short time we have together.

Beyond the variegated sensations and the helpful motivations, science has discovered emotionality’s deeper purpose: the timeworn mechanisms of emotion allow two human beings to receive the contents of each other’s minds. Emotion is the messenger of love; it is the vehicle that carries every signal from one brimming heart to another. For human beings, feeling deeply is synonymous with being alive. (Lewis, Amini, and Lannon, 2000, p.37)

If collaborating artists have dedicated themselves to the connection they share before taking to the stage, the possibility of being able to build and maintain connection with the audience becomes more likely. Being willing and able to gain emotional insight from the work at hand, and then to share that insight by engaging in honest communicative connection is what Vaughan Williams refers to when he describes both the performing and written work of Arthur Cranmer in his introduction to Cranmer’s book, *The Art of Singing*: “It is the presence of that emotional insight which informs his singing which makes its real beauty, lovely
though his velvety tone is. And this integrity of purpose he can impart to the reader.” (Vaughan Williams in Manning, 2008, p.113) Our integrity of purpose – our authenticity, in other words – is easily read from the audience and while audience members might not exactly be able to pinpoint the source of disconnection or lack of authenticity, they are hard-wired (as all human beings are) to recognise genuine connection and communication and their absence.

Within the effulgence of their new brain, mammals developed a capacity we call *limbic resonance* – a symphony of mutual exchange and internal adaptation whereby two mammals become attuned to each other’s inner states. It is limbic resonance that makes looking into the face of another emotionally responsive creature a multi-layered experience. Instead of seeing a pair of eyes as two bespeckled buttons, when we look into the ocular portals to a limbic brain our vision goes deep: the sensations multiply, just as two mirrors placed in opposition create a shimmering ricochet of reflections whose depths recede into infinity. Eye contact, although it occurs over a gap of yards, is not a metaphor. When we meet the gaze of another, two nervous systems achieve a palpable and intimate apposition. (Lewis, Amini, and Lannon, 2000, p.63)

This continuous feedback loop of communication between audience and performers is made all the more apparent because, in art song, we often deal with “…music that does not, as far as the singer is concerned, make an issue of display or technique..” (Bostridge, 2011, p.56). The simplicity and vulnerability often inherent in the music and text we are delivering makes our task that much more challenging. Without histrionics or grand dramatic gestures to hide behind, we are laid bare in front of our audiences and our emotional intentions and ability to connect are directly in the spotlight, facilitating either transcendent emotional experience or complete disconnection.

The projection of simplicity can be a very complex business. An exceptional reservoir of nuances – even though they may remain unused – and a considerable degree of sensitivity and inner freedom are required if the result is not to be, instead of simplicity, emptiness and boredom. (Brendel, 2001, p. 41)

**Wholeheartedness**

In the course of her years of research, Brenè Brown uncovered a group of people who seemed to be naturally shame resilient and who appeared to be “engaging with the world from a place of worthiness.” (Brown, 2012, p.9) She called these people the Wholehearted.

The Wholehearted identify vulnerability as the catalyst for courage, compassion, and connection. In fact, the willingness to be vulnerable emerged as the single clearest value shared by all of the women and men whom I would describe as Wholehearted. (Brown, 2012, p.11)

The idea of Wholehearted living could have implications for us in recital performance as well as daily life. If we expect to be able to truly connect with and
transport our audiences, approaching the stage with the outlook described by Brown as that of the Wholehearted – cultivating things such as authenticity, self-compassion, gratitude, joy, intuition, trusting faith, and meaningful work, among others (for a complete list see Brown, 2012, p.9) – may help to not only make the stage a meaningful workplace but also one in which we can achieve our deeper emotional performance and interpretive goals. Soprano Dawn Upshaw’s observations on vulnerability (encompassing ideas like generosity and authenticity) confirm that the recital stage is a place where the attitudes of the Wholehearted might usefully be explored.

I guess I feel, unless something is risked a little bit that the offering isn’t as generous and genuine … and when you are open, you’re vulnerable – but when you’ve been open in terms of offering some part of yourself it is a more generous act. (Dawn Upshaw on ABC Classic FM, 2014)

The idea that our ability to be generous might impact upon our ability to connect with our audiences and collaborators is a powerful one. In making ourselves vulnerable, we are exhibiting the trust in our audiences and collaborators that we hope to receive in return. Einstein’s opening remarks from his 1931 essay, The World As I See It, resonates with this idea of giving and receiving in equal measure in our capacities onstage or as part of an audience, as do the earlier notes on limbic resonance.

… from the point of view of daily life, without going deeper, we exist for our fellow-men — in the first place for those on whose smiles and welfare all our happiness depends, and next for all those unknown to us personally with whose destinies we are bound up by the tie of sympathy. A hundred times every day I remind myself that my inner and outer life depend on the labours of other men, living and dead, and that I must exert myself in order to give in the same measure as I have received and am still receiving. (Einstein, 1931)

If we are to create and reinforce our connection with our audiences, through our innate desire for limbic resonance, we might begin by engaging in generous, Wholehearted behaviours that will facilitate that level of exchange. Our willingness to engage in these behaviours rests on the value we place on each other and on ourselves. It may not be enough to reach out to our audiences and collaborators with anything less than warmth, compassion, and love. Although our industry might encourage us to believe that it is our ability to impress with our talents that is important in our work, I believe that it is our ability to love wholeheartedly that will cross the divide between us and those with whom we seek to connect.

To love at all is to be vulnerable. Love anything and your heart will be wrung and possibly broken. If you want to make sure of keeping it intact you must give it to no one,
Resilience

Our ability to engage with a Wholehearted philosophy in our work onstage might rely largely on our own resilience in facing the parts of our life which we would normally keep hidden from others; the parts that make us uniquely vulnerable. In our modern culture (which Brown describes as one of “scarcity”), and the classical performance industry, the emphasis on presenting a powerful, perfect, and untouchable façade to the world tells us that our vulnerabilities are shameful and useless. As Brown notes, “The greatest casualties of a scarcity culture are our willingness to own our vulnerabilities and our ability to engage with the world from a place of worthiness.” (2012, p.29) If we are encouraged to hide our vulnerabilities and consider them to be short-comings, we are unlikely to be willing to engage with those emotions that might connect with those vulnerable places; that is, the emotions that much of art song repertoire is dedicated to exploring. Without a sense of resilience and the willingness to walk confidently into the emotional places our culture tells us it is unsafe to go, we might eventually lack the ability or insight to engage meaningfully and authentically with these places at all.

In one of his more poetic moments, Adorno proposes that awkward, embarrassing gestures preserve ‘a trace of vanished life.’ I understand this to mean that our accidental gestures—our lapses of composure, as it were—carry an imprint of our character, of the part of us that we are asked to banish but that never quite vanishes.

…

This is why there is something quite hollow about the ideal of a happy, balanced life—a life unruffled by anxiety. It’s why I think that underneath our quest for vibrant health lurks a tragic kind of discreet death: the demise of everything that is eccentric and messy about human life. Our society sells us the quick fix: If you get a cold, take some decongestants; if you get depressed, take some antidepressants; and if you get anxious, take those tranquilizers. But what are we supposed to take when we lose our character? (Ruti, 2014)

This could be not only artistically important but also vital to our well-being in the world at large. In her book, Molecules of Emotion (1997), pharmacologist Candace Pert writes about how our emotional state affects us on a molecular level, thus impacting our physical health and connecting our minds and bodies in ways far more complex than was previously thought to be the case. By denying the full spectrum of our emotional experience, we may be not only limiting ourselves in our creative work but also in our physical health which, in turn, impacts upon our
work (especially for singers, whose instrument is the body). The downward spiral is clear.

…the emotions are a key element in self-care because they allow us to enter the bodymind's conversation. By getting in touch with our emotions, both by listening to them and by directing them through the psychosomatic network, we gain access to the healing wisdom that is everyone’s natural biological right. And how do we do this? First by acknowledging and claiming all our feelings, not just the positive ones … and the more we deny them, the greater the ultimate toxicity, which often takes the form of an explosive release of pent-up emotion. That's when emotion can be damaging to both oneself and others, because its expression becomes overwhelming, sometimes even violent.

So my advice is to express all your feelings, regardless of whether you think they are acceptable, and then let them go. Buddhists understand this when they talk about nongrasping, or nonattachment to experience. By letting all emotions have their natural release, the 'bad' ones are transformed into 'good' ones and, in Buddhist terms, we are then liberated from suffering. When your emotions are moving and your chemicals flowing, you will experience feelings of freedom, hopefulness, joy, because you are in a healthy, 'whole' state. (Pert, 1997, pp.285-6)

Pert’s reference to being in a “whole” state, quite independent of the work done by Brown, indicates that there is a thread of research connecting our physical resilience, emotional resilience, and ability to execute our artistic goals. It also encourages us to think of our work as far more than mere entertainment and with much deeper reaching and longer lasting effects than we might realise. The implications in our decision to fully engage in deeply emotional poetic and musical material can extend beyond the concert hall and out into the wider community. They can also be found deep within ourselves and our collaborators, at a level that could have serious repercussions on all the aspects of our lives. Our resilience and our authenticity seem to depend on us making “the choice to let our true selves be seen” (Brown, 2010, p.49), and that choice appears to depend on us showing up to the task at hand with authenticity and resilience. Knowing that this emotional journey is not one we need to take alone, that we can all explore these often dark and frightening places together, might reinforce that resilience and encourage the authenticity we are all able to bring to a musical and poetic experience. Being bound together by the larger goal of creating something together in the recital space, we may be able to reinforce the natural bond we all share and validate our innate desire for connection.

Feelings of hopelessness, fear, blame, pain, discomfort, vulnerability, and disconnection sabotage resilience. The only experience that seems broad and fierce enough to combat a list like that is the belief that we’re all in this together and that something greater than us has the capacity to bring love and compassion into our lives. (Brown, 2010, p.73)

**Courage and Passion**
Courage is inherent in the artistic process and it is this combined with passion that
drives so many of us to continue down artistic paths in life which often have such uncertain outcomes. Our commitment to our art form, and our desire to say something meaningful through it, is often what keeps us coming back, despite the unpredictability of the outcomes, either musical or in outward success and recognition. Brené Brown shares an anecdote on her feelings as she was being introduced as the next speaker at TED in 2010 (the talk that would put her work on the world stage) which encapsulates this courage and the drive behind it.

I took a deep breath and recited my vulnerability prayer as I waited for my turn: Give me the courage to show up and let myself be seen. Then, seconds before I was introduced, I thought about a paperweight on my desk that reads, ‘What would you attempt to do if you knew you could not fail?’ I pushed that question out of my head to make room for a new question. As I walked up to the stage, I literally whispered aloud, ‘What’s worth doing even if I fail?’ (Brown, 2012, 42)

The willingness to make ourselves vulnerable and to bring our whole selves to bear on our interpretations of deeply emotional music and poetry might benefit from our having this courage and passion in ample supply. In recounting a conversation with a colleague at a conference (who was attending as an expert on innovation), Brown shares with us just how many times we must call and re-call on our courage if we are going to make important steps forward in our field.

“… it’s the fear of introducing an idea and being ridiculed, laughed at, and belittled. If you’re willing to subject yourself to that experience, and if you survive it, then it becomes the fear of failure and the fear of being wrong. People believe they’re only as good as their ideas and that their ideas can’t seem too ‘out there’ and they can’t ‘not know’ everything. The problem is that innovative ideas often sound crazy and failure and learning are part of revolution. Evolution and incremental change is important and we need it, but we’re desperate for real revolution and that requires a different type of courage and creativity.” (Kevin Surace in Brown, 2012, pp.185-186)

The courage to put oneself in front of an audience for inspection and display is, of course, well-known among performing artists. However, going beyond that idea, we might also need the courage to engage in the thing that might “sound crazy”, the revolutionary thing that will make us completely vulnerable and able to connect with our audiences and collaborators at a deeper level. In relation to this research, that thing has been engagement with challenging and confronting emotional material; material that forces us to look at parts of life we might normally prefer to ignore. As discussed above, this difficult emotional terrain is an unavoidable part of life; in fact, to avoid it could mean blocking ourselves in more ways than might be immediately obvious. Artistically, having the courage and passion to face these confronting emotions may bring us to a fuller understanding of our repertoire and of the human experience. In fact, we take our modern word
passion from the Latin *passio* – suffering. With this in mind, the idea of “suffering for our art” takes on a new meaning.

If there is a meaning in life at all, then there must be a meaning in suffering. Suffering is an ineradicable part of life, even as fate and death. Without suffering and death human life cannot be complete. (Frankl, 1959/R2006, p.67)

Combined with the etymology of vulnerability – from the Latin *vulnerare*; to wound – it is possible to begin to build a picture of an authentically engaged recital performer as a “wounded healer” a concept pioneered by Jung (Benziman, Kannai, & Ahmad, 2012), suffering onstage in order to deliver transcendent emotional experience that connects with, and moves, audiences. In this way, we might lead by example, giving others the courage to show themselves in their own lives and to heal further others with their own wounds. As Brown quotes her friend, Katherine Centre, “You have to be brave with your life so that others can be brave with theirs.” (Brown, 2010, p.54)

All of this adds up to what Brown calls “daring greatly”. While it might seem a frightening or unstable place from which to reach out to an audience, my own experience and that of the authors quoted here would suggest that it is in fact our surest path to authentic, meaningful connection – the goal of all humans, in whatever field we might find ourselves. And in connecting meaningfully with one another, we may be able to reaffirm for ourselves the valuable place each of us holds in relation to the other in our communities.

The most powerful forms of connection are love and belonging – they are both irreducible needs of men, women, and children. As I conducted my interviews, I realized that only one thing separated the men and women who felt a deep sense of love and belonging from the people who seemed to be struggling for it. That one thing was the belief in their worthiness. It’s as simple and complicated as this: If we want to fully experience love and belonging, we must believe that we are worthy of love and belonging. (Brown, 2012, p.145)

**Relationship**

The most surprising and profound discovery for me during my journey through this research project is that Relational Cultural Theory (RCT) might successfully be transplanted from psychology to the creative arts to provide a new theoretical paradigm to the field. Artists are connecting beings – connecting with our creative forebears, our colleagues, and our audiences – and the idea that we grow through connections built on growth-fostering relationships (Jordan, 2008, p.2) is one that could match well with the process of preparing and creating musical performances, as well as other artistic products. In classical music, RCT could
provide us with a way of looking at the various disconnections many practitioners and audiences face today, and might also provide a model for the ways in which we could seek to move on from outdated ways of being to both heal old disconnections and create new connections that might revitalise an industry which is always seeking to make itself more relevant to contemporary society. Within the field of classical vocal recital work, there are three relationships to take into account; those between singer and pianist, performers and audience, and performers and creators. Each of these relationships could benefit from care and attention as we strive to make the resulting performance surpass the individual contribution of each participant (or participating group) to become something that is truly more than the sum of its parts. Although classical musicians can sometimes be solitary creatures, given the hours of work we do alone in practice rooms, we should be careful not to underestimate the importance of warm, loving connection to our own lives, even if we are unaccustomed to being expressive in this way.

… without question, putting ourselves out there means there’s a far greater risk of feeling hurt. But as I look back on my own life and what Daring Greatly has meant to me, I can honestly say that nothing is as uncomfortable, dangerous, and hurtful as believing that I’m standing on the outside of my life looking in and wondering what it would be like if I had the courage to show up and let myself be seen. (Brown, 2012, p.249)

**General Application to Classical Music**
The world of classical music might learn much from that of RCT. In my experience, the classical music industry sometimes mirrors the statement by Hartling and Sparks (2008) that, in the world of therapy, many practitioners who would seek to create change face difficulties as they find themselves in workplaces “that continue to reinforce the normative values of separation and disconnection” (p.165) Performers in both industry and academia (itself woven into the industry at large) sometimes face situations, as do many therapists, that are “all too often professionally disempowering, disconnecting, and isolating, i.e. ‘cultures of disconnection’” (p.165) With help and guidance from Relational Cultural Theorists and their work, performers and researchers in classical music might be able to commit “ourselves to critically analyzing and transforming the systems of power, domination, subordination, and stratification that impede the health, growth, and development of all people.” (pp.166-167) Few people would argue that connection is central to the tacit aims of the classical music industry. In my decision to commit to the process of connection in my work, I have enjoyed
deeper and lasting engagement with audiences and collaborators, and revitalised relationships with composers and poets. It has also reminded me that any one of us (from beginner to seasoned professional) might enjoy a meaningful connection with the creators of the works that mean so much to us, without having to be an expert on their lives or the full extent of their creative output.

The road I have travelled has been far from perfect. I have given of myself to the point of emotional exhaustion, misjudged crucial moments in relationships, and done things that (in hindsight) I might do differently. However, with RCT as a guiding philosophy on this journey of research and performance, I have continued to show up, allowed myself to fail and try again, and have found the courage to search disconnection for the places where healing might begin, and reconnection to relationships that are truly growth-fostering might take place. As Jeanette Winterson writes, “The things that I regret in my life are not errors of judgement but failures of feeling” (Winterson, 2013) and while my judgement might have not always been exactly on target, my feeling and commitment to emotional authenticity have never failed me.

The lesson that I think could be important to anyone engaged in classical music activity (in whatever sphere) is that, although we find ourselves in a world where self-sufficiency and non-dependence are sometimes idealised, we might benefit from finding the courage to re-engage with one another, and with our stakeholders, with vulnerability, authenticity, and a commitment to warm, loving connection.

If we are working in an environment that is moving in a relational direction, an environment that values growth-fostering connection, we and others should experience aspects of the five good things, including increased energy for the work we are doing, empowerment to take action on behalf of our clients, increased clarity and knowledge about others and ourselves in our work setting, increased sense of worth with regard to ourselves and others, and a desire for more connection to others in these work situations (Miller, 1986). We might describe relational settings as cultures of connection, cultures that explicitly or implicitly support growth through relationship, mutual empowerment, responsiveness, authenticity, and movement toward mutuality. Relational work settings are not conflict free or characterized by perfect, continuous connection. Disconnections and conflicts are natural parts of the “ebb and flow” of relationships found in all settings (Miller & Stiver, 1994). In fact, disconnections and conflict are essential contributors to change and growth in relationships. However, in contrast to nonrelational settings, relational settings foster the conditions that encourage people to work through disconnections and conflict, creating opportunities for constructive change in the relationship. (Hartling & Sparks, 2008, p.169)
Singer and Pianist

By far the most important relationships to me during this research journey, and to my perspective on recital singing in general, have been those with the musicians who have collaborated with me at the piano. Without these people there would be nothing to present to an audience and without having RCT’s “five good things” in our relationships (which I was lucky enough to have in both cases) I would never have been able to find the courage to enter into my preparation and performances with as much openness and vulnerability as I was able to do, thanks to their support, guidance, and faith in the process. The growth that was fostered in me through the influence of both relationships made me realise how little I had known previously about both the instrument and the musicians which are most often at the singer’s side. It showed me the immeasurable value of having someone I could love and trust as a collaborator, and it confirmed the importance of the intimacy of connection between partners who need to be hyper-aware of each other mentally, emotionally, and physically. I came to see that, while it might seem that singer and pianist give equally to create the resulting performance, there remains a further value that results from the connection between two unique artistic beings - a connection that can never come from any other collaborative relationship due to the unique nature of each human participant – and it is this un-nameable, indefinable thing that has the ability to make a performance transcendent.

Research into the coupling of the heart rate of collaborating musicians, as in Vickhoff et al.’s (2013) study on choral singers, and the world of limbic resonance explored by Lewis, Amini, and Lannon (2000) go some way to explaining both the importance of the connection between singer and pianist, and the impact on both people of the relationship of which they are a part. The long hours spent in each other’s company, delving deep into the emotional worlds of the music and poetry, mean that singer and pianist gradually become more and more attuned to one another. Given enough time and consistent connection, each partner’s awareness of the other can eventually reach a point where (as Ian Bostridge notes of his long-term collaborative relationship with pianist Julius Drake) they “know each other’s musical instincts backwards” (Bostridge, 2011, p.73) While Stephen and I were lucky enough to have two years of steadily building that collaborative relationship, Leanne and I needed to fall back on our long friendship to recall
working with the musicians that we were a number of years ago. I am certain that it is only because of the historical strength and intimacy of connection between she and I that we were able to pull the performance off at all; with a stranger it would have been impossible for me to bring together something of equal communicative value in such a short time.

The following autoethnographic excerpt was written around the time that Stephen and I were preparing the programme of songs by Mahler and Mussorgsky. It goes a long way to explaining the motivation behind the value I place on the collaborative relationship and the instinctive and intimate working environment I enjoyed so much and found so important in my mission to create an experience for an audience that would be truly enveloping and transporting.

The next rehearsal finally gives me what I have been looking for so long and trying so hard to manufacture. Stephen and I are relaxed and easy with each other; we talk more about the life experiences being expressed through the music and suddenly life and music combine to create something that is unique to the union that we have at the piano and that seems to really say something from us both. It is in the wake of this experience that I realise what it is that I find so fundamental to the singer/pianist relationship. We singers can, of course, never fully know how every audience member is moved (if at all) by the music and poetry we present to them, nor is it helpful to dwell too much on trying to create our perceived ideal reaction in the listener. What I want to know, from every pianist I work with on such close and important collaborations, is that the other musician in the partnership that is doing the creating (my other half, if you will) is moved, and how they are moved, and what drives them to give of themselves to create this work with me. Without that, I feel like this single entity of singerpianist is only half aware of itself, is partly divorced from its own emotional response to the work, and thus is unable to give the work the life it might have if this single interpreter could be more fully aware and integrated within itself. This sense of oneness that seemed to come so easily to our work together on Winterreise, is beginning to show itself here as well. While trying to find a suitable tempo for the closing lullaby of the Kindertotenlieder, I suggest that what we are looking for is not so much a numbered tempo as a feeling that is natural to the rhythm of the human body at rest, or while soothing someone to rest. We try the passage again
and as we begin to search together for a symbiotic way to express that kind of movement we discover one rested heartbeat, one low breath, and a unity that brings so much more to the music than the combination of two fine but separate musicians.

Performers and Audience
The three journeys I took with my audiences, inside the larger journey of this research project gave me a number of new insights into the responsibilities and possibilities that exist within the performance space. For me, the recital hall became a sacred space – a place of ritual, full of transformational energy and renewal – where my audiences and I held intimate conversations and shared far more of ourselves with each other than they or I ever imagined possible. In our secular society, ritual is something that has largely been lost to us and its benefits seem to have been forgotten. What ritual gives us, in a positive sense, is a chance to cut out all other external noise that might detract from our focus and to sink deep into an experience mentally emotionally and physically; that is, to engage our body-mind in an encounter and not merely our intellect.

Elements of ritual contributed to my decisions about how to present these song cycles to my audiences. From the care I took to embrace and individually welcome people as they entered the space before the performance (as when people are welcomed onto a marae in New Zealand Māori culture) to the sharing of food and drink (common in rituals from a number of cultures with traditions of breaking bread together), all of my decisions about the space and how to present myself and the work in it owed much to the idea of creating a ritual, albeit one that was reasonably far removed from the traditional concert hall experience. These were rituals of warm, loving connection; relaxed, open, vulnerable, and small enough for us all to connect in some way with one another before, during, and after the central event of the music performance. In breaking down the usual barriers of distance and disconnection (the pianists and I were never segregated from the audience before performances and the music would begin casually once people had gradually decided to take their seats of their own accord), an atmosphere was created where people could feel at ease and let down their usual guards of social propriety, dismiss their fears of being unfamiliar with classical music and the norms around its performance, and open themselves up to whatever
might be about to occur. All that was left to me to do was to use my voice and the music to create the line of connection and maintain it through the journey I was asking my audience to take with me. I feel unable to comment here on the success or failure of that venture. I only know that it is what I tried to do every time I went to perform each of these three programmes. Annie Ross’ comments on Billie Holiday describe the kind of performer I was (and still am) hoping to be for my guests.

Her voice had an intimacy. You felt that she had lived through the lyrics she was singing. She knew what she was singing about and she also had that kind of thing they call charisma, I guess, that makes somebody think that they’re singing only to you.” (Annie Ross in Byron & Saylor 1990/R 2009)

As our relationship was formed and grew (and as I did everything I could to make sure that RCT’s “five good things” could be present and help us all to connect and grow together), my audiences and I were able to surmount language barriers, hold long periods of focus, and approach difficult emotional material together with strength and confidence and unfailing faith in each other. There is no doubt in my mind that the contribution they made to the performance was both valuable and palpable, and that it changed me as a musician and as a human. Each performance had the feeling of holding a long conversation in which one side of the dialogue, although silent, was electrically charged with everything that an audience can bring to a performance.

In the concert hall, each motionless listener is part of the performance. The concentration of the player charges the electric tension in the auditorium and returns to him magnified; thus the audience makes its contribution, helping the pianist to cope with his instrument. (Brendel, 2001, p. 344)

There is no doubt that I could have completed proficient performances of all these works without the focus on relationship that I came to find so essential to my way of working. What I am sure of, however, is that the performances would have been just that; proficient. While I can’t attest to the level my performances might have gained from critical inspection, I can say that I have never had such moving experiences in performance (most especially in the performance of Kindertotenlieder and the Songs and Dances of Death), and that many in the audiences shared with me that they felt the same way from their perspective. That so many of the people who were deeply touched by their experiences with me were not regular concert goers (in some cases, they had never been to a classical concert before), affirmed my instinct that warm, loving connection is what
matters, whatever the creative medium at hand.

The relationship between performer and audience – first of all the venue itself affects that relationship. At any given moment sometimes you receive a lot of feedback and I don’t mean applause. It’s just energy in the hall from an audience. You can tell how they’re listening or how they aren’t listening. And again it’s that engaged listening that really affects my experience as a performer. So it’s not just the listening in the musicians, I guess, onstage is it? It’s this relationship with an audience as well. (Dawn Upshaw on ABC Classic FM, 2014).

Performers and Creators
Aspects of this project became increasingly difficult to document as time passed. My relationship with the creators of these works was one of those aspects. The further I travelled in my journey and the more committed I became to my realisation that, for me, relationship was the keystone around which other aspects of being a recitalist were stacked, the more I also delved into the relationships that I was having backwards in time with long dead musicians and poets. So much of what I feel about these relationships is intuitive, personal, and impossible to backup with scholarly publications or wider reading, as we are required to do in humanities research. I can only say that, once I gave myself permission to build meaningful personal relationships with the creators of my work through their creative output, I began to open up a much larger world of engagement with my material that helped me immeasurably as a performer. As Barenboim notes, “it is utterly senseless to use a composer’s music simply to portray aspects of his biography” (Barenboim, 2008, p.119), and I found that (once I had learned the basic facts of where and when a piece of music or poetry was written or composed) I was far more interested and engaged by the human I felt through the art than the one described in historical texts. Of the many historical biographical texts that I consulted, the ones that were most meaningful to me were those that gave an idea of the human being and his values behind the dates and achievements of his life.

I have a sense that these relationships between myself and the creators of these works has something in common with those between the composers and the poets. The poet and composer of only one song cycle in this project knew each other at the time of composition (Golenischev-Kutuzov and Mussorgsky with the Songs and Dances of Death); in all the other cases, the composers found existing poetic material that they connected and wanted to work with, just as I did with the cycles that were created. Each creator recognised something in the other; a kindred spirit
whose work and motivation was obviously tied to their own. This recognition may or may not have been conscious. What is clear to me is that these people were having relationships with one another through their work, just as I have been during the years of this research.

As W. H. Auden once wrote: “Through art, we are able to break bread with the dead, and without communion with the dead a fully human life is impossible.” (Stover & Ryan, 2001) Through the art of these musicians and writers, I feel as if I have broken bread with kindred creative spirits and the personal relationships I have developed with them have supported me through my journeys into the emotional worlds they were inspired to explore with their words and music, especially in cases (as with the programme of English song) when my eligibility to connect with the material has come into question. As mentioned above, this has been an emergent idea; one that took hold more as the journey progressed. I look forward to returning to future performances of these works now that I am more confident in this kind of engagement with these creators and their works.

… I have never considered myself to be merely the passive recipient of the composer’s commands, preferring to promote his cause of my own free will and in my own way. (Brendel, 2001, p. 30)

**Future Research Directions**

This research points to a number of possible future research directions. I hope that this documentation of my own pathways of inspiration, the search to find what I have to say through the music that is unique, and the exploration of the many relationships that impact on my work as a performer might encourage other performers (whether from classical music or any other creative industry) to investigate their own work in a similar way. We can, of course, revere the great performers who have gone before us but to try to emulate their methods of interpretation because of their perceived greatness is to denigrate our own ideas and, in the end, to say nothing. Great performers (particularly in these performance arts where we speak directly to our audiences) inspire us, in large part, because they infuse their work with so much of themselves. If we lack the courage to do that for ourselves, we are nothing more than mimics; particularly in classical music where we are usually reproducing works that have often been performed before. We must be more than machines that reprocess other performer’s emotions, no matter what our level or who our audiences might be.
I hope that other classical recital singers might be able to give themselves the time and space to explore their repertoire in a similar way to what I have done here. Sadly, art song is not often fostered outside institutions like music schools; I know I could never have allowed myself the freedom to pursue my interest in art song in this way without my doctoral programme. There must be more that we can do – more support we can provide – for recital artists who need space like this to develop more fully as interpreters, and a platform on which to practice the art and discipline of recital singing. It could be useful for performers across artistic disciplines who all seek to connect with their audiences with a similar, conversational style of delivery, to work together to learn more about their own artform through one another’s practices. Music certainly has much to pass on to our colleagues in other creative industries.

The inevitable flow in music means constant movement – development, change, or transformation. Nothing stands still and when it is repeated it is different because of the passage of time. In life, however, the human being tends to attempt to dispose of the unpleasurable or the negative as soon as he can, but also to hold on as solidly as possible to the pleasurable or the positive. Both of these desires do not take into consideration the fact that the human being himself is permanently subject to change, and the speed at which it happens.

The power of music lies in its ability to speak to all aspects of the human being – the animal, the emotional, the intellectual, and the spiritual. How often we think that personal, social, and political issues are independent, without influencing each other. From music we learn that there is an objective impossibility; there simply are no independent elements. Logical thought and intuitive emotions must be permanently united. Music teaches us, in short, that everything is connected. (Barenboim, 2008, p.134)

Implications

The implications of this research are at once far-reaching and deeply internal. Any performer who chooses to honestly and openly engage in a process such as the one I have undertaken can be assured that they will come away with worlds opened up inside them and a wealth of emotion to share with audiences through their work. Who that work might reach is really the central question of all of this. Where can we build growth-fostering relationships, rebuild ones that we might have neglected, and revitalise existing ones that still require ongoing attention and support? How can our vulnerability assist others in finding their strength and encourage them to go on, outside the artistic space, with new emotional experiences that might inspire them to be more vulnerable in turn? The question of who our work might reach is also a self-searching one. Have we truly reached out to our collaborators and nourished our relationships with them. Have we
reached back to the initiators of our work to find the personal relationship that might be possible through our material? More importantly than anything, have we reached into our own psyches and souls, faced our demons, embraced our potential, explored our emotions, and reconnected with our sense of who we are as human beings?

Most lifestyle choices involve things we do or don't do but I'd like to consider a choice that has more to do with being than doing - after all, we are human beings, not human doings - and this is the decision to become more conscious. Full consciousness must involve awareness of not just mental but emotional and even basic physical experiences as well. The more conscious we are, the more we can 'listen in' on the conversation going on at autonomic or subconscious levels of the bodymind where basic functions such as breathing, digestion, immunity, pain control, and blood flow are carried out. Only then can we enter into that conversation, using our awareness to enhance the effectiveness of the autonomic system, where health and disease are being determined minute by minute. (Pert, 1997, p.286)

The most important thing to come of all of this, in my experience, has been the strengthening of the bonds of humanity that I have shared with my collaborators, audiences, and creators. The warm, loving connection that has been so vital to me throughout this journey has led me to the place where all journeys end: home. Home to myself in so many ways; as an artist, a woman, a singer, a writer, a reader. And home to the philosophy that drove me to begin this journey in the first place; the idea that Philip Larkin states in the closing line of his poem *An Arundel Tomb*: “what will survive of us is love.” (Larkin, 1964, p.65)

Through a willingness to risk the unknown, to venture forth into unfamiliar territory, you can undertake the search for your own self - the ultimate goal of growth. Through reaching out and committing yourself to dialogue with fellow human beings, you can begin to transcend your individual existence, becoming at one with yourself and others. And through a lifetime of such commitment, you can face your final end with peace and joy, knowing that you have lived your life well. (Kübler-Ross, 1986, p.145)

Home is where the heart is, so where is mine? In a teahouse in Prague, a garden in Los Angeles, a riverbank in London, a rehearsal studio in Brisbane, and all across the beaches, bush land and open country of New Zealand. A broken heart, for sure, but one that reaches as far and wide as the loved ones in my life, the places that have meant something to me, and the people I have yet to connect with. I’m told by a friend and fellow musician that I have a big, available heart and I know this must be true – I’ve given so much of it away and still there seems so much more to give. I suspect my heart will not rest until it has homes with
people and places too numerous to count. Until home is all places and all people it encounters. All of this isn’t to say that I’m some kind of highly evolved or enlightened being. The flaws in my humanity come through just as much as anyone else’s – probably more so, as I tend to express myself right away and reflect after the event. My strong passions and general impulsiveness combine to make me volatile if I’m feeling cornered or overwhelming if I’ve recently taken you into my life and heart. I can be a terrible grudge holder and I am especially slow to forgive if I feel that I’ve been betrayed. This happens from time to time when I hold new people up on a pedestal (as I am wont to do). Elevated to heights they can’t possibly live up to, people tend to disappoint me by being as human and as flawed as I am. I almost always find it easier to embrace the shortcomings of strangers than those of my beloved inner circle. And yet, because I love them so much, I’m a fierce defender of those that I have adopted as my own. Sometimes a little too fierce – blindered by my own love for them, I’ve been taken advantage of or hurt more than a few times by people I trusted or cared about too much. And herein lies the secret that drives me to communicate in the way that I do. I’m as broken and unfinished as the next person (as you are and all of your loved ones), and inside all the imperfection is the only place to pursue perfection of artistry. It’s only by laying myself – all my joys and my struggles – completely open that I am able to to connect with you from a standpoint of vulnerable humanity. I’m not trying to impress you with my high notes, my fluid coloratura, or my ability to fill a hall with my voice. I just want to talk to you. I love you. I have something to say to you – something to share about the human condition that we all find ourselves exploring together. Singing just happens to be the way I’ve been given to say what I need to say. And, like all artists and all humans, I want to be seen, heard, understood, and loved.

Obviously there is much more to this journey than has reached the page. There are half-truths and omissions to protect people I care about, but the message is clear. We must connect with each other and with ourselves if we are to fulfill the potential we hold within us, whatever that might mean to each individual. For singers of songs that seek to tell us the greater truths about our lives, it means giving of ourselves and our unique perspective, delivering the message with vulnerability and authenticity, and holding as beloved and important both those on stage making music with us and those with whom we would seek to
communicate. Working in this way, we have the ability to make the stage our tūrangawaewae; the place that makes us strong, and whole - wholehearted, even. When we build strong, lasting connections with the people with whom we chose to share the stage, we reaffirm this place of safety and strength, giving us the confidence to communicate honestly and openly, and giving our audiences permission to feel deeply and to connect with their own vulnerability without shame. In this way, the stage has become a sacred place for me, the recital a profoundly moving ritual, dedicated to creating connection and encouraging growth for performers and audiences alike. This is the task that has been given to me - to reach out to people from this standing place (this tūrangawaewae) of the classical recital stage to hold them with warmth, love, and compassion throughout their lives and mine. There is a proverb in Māori that encapsulates the spirit behind all of this and, to be honest, behind everything that I do in life:

**He aha te mea nui o tenei ao? He tangata, he tangata, he tangata.**

What is the most important thing in this world? It is people, it is people, it is people.
APPENDIX I – COMPLEMENTARY PERFORMERS

While I am unable to provide full-length recordings of performances from complementary disciplines (such as standup comedy and spoken word poetry) referenced in this work, many of the individual songs or moments referred to are available to view as short clips on YouTube. I would encourage readers to view these clips in conjunction with each chapter in order to gain a fuller understanding of how the work of these performers encapsulates the spirit of each recital programme.

CHAPTER 1
Simon Amstell – Do Nothing (complete show – recommended clip is first 4 minutes)
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k5djeI73Pdc

Jacques Brel – “Ne me quitte pas” – from Les Adieux a l’Olympia (1966)
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=za_6A0XnMyw

Edith Piaf – “Je ne regrette rien”
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rzy2wZSg5ZM

CHAPTER 2
Eve Ensler – “My vagina was my village” – from The Vagina Monologues
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sQPVgRbRbI

Whoopi Goldberg – from Live on Broadway (1985)
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=44TsWpmpl8o

Tig Notaro talking about her album “Live”
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sR7aRzu7-o8

CHAPTER 3
Mercedes Sosa – “Gracias a la vida” – from …Acustico en Suica (or something)
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AsadhxkzhI0

Sarah Kay – If I should have a daughter
http://www.ted.com/talks/sarah_kay_if_i_should_have_a_daughter.html

Richard Pryor – from “Live on the Sunset Strip”
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AltWj4iAmno
APPENDIX II – RECITAL CARDS

At each recital, audience members had the opportunity to take away with them small cards as mementos of the occasion that we had all shared. The front of the card contained the invitation image for the performance (each invitation was created online at www.celebrations.com and sent to guests via email). A poem in English that resonated with the theme of each programme was printed on the reverse. Copies of these cards and poems are reproduced below for the information of the examiners.

After great pain, a formal feeling comes
BY EMILY DICKINSON

After great pain, a formal feeling comes –
The Nerves sit ceremonious, like Tombs –
The stiff Heart questions ‘was it He, that bore,’
And ‘Yesterday, or Centuries before’?

The Feet, mechanical, go round –
A Wooden way
Of Ground, or Air, or Ought –
Regardless grown,
A Quartz contentment, like a stone –

This is the Hour of Lead –
Remembered, if outlived,
As Freezing persons, recollect the Snow –
First – Chill – then Stupor – then the letting go –
Holy Sonnets: Death, be not proud

BY JOHN DONNE

Death, be not proud, though some have called thee
Mighty and dreadful, for thou art not so;
For those whom thou think'st thou dost overthrow
Die not, poor Death, nor yet canst thou kill me.
From rest and sleep, which but thy pictures be,
Much pleasure; then from thee much more must flow,
And soonest our best men with thee do go,
Rest of their bones, and soul's delivery.
Thou art slave to fate, chance, kings, and desperate men,
And dost with poison, war, and sickness dwell,
And poppy or charms can make us sleep as well
And better than thy stroke; why swell'st thou then?
One short sleep past, we wake eternally
And death shall be no more; Death, thou shalt die.
The Road Not Taken
BY ROBERT FROST
Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,
And sorry I could not travel both
And be one traveler, long I stood
And looked down one as far as I could
To where it bent in the undergrowth;

Then took the other, as just as fair,
And having perhaps the better claim,
Because it was grassy and wanted wear;
Though as for that the passing there
Had worn them really about the same,

And both that morning equally lay
In leaves no step had trodden black.
Oh, I kept the first for another day!
Yet knowing how way leads on to way,
I doubted if I should ever come back.

I shall be telling this with a sigh
Somewhere ages and ages hence:
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference.
Included with this thesis are dvd recordings of each of the three performances undertaken throughout this project. Missing from each recording are the speeches that I gave before performances of the cycles. In essence, these speeches were microcosms of each chapter. I shared some historical context with the audience, spoke about the thematic material being explored, and related some of the ways in which the worlds of these musical and poetic works interacted with my own life experiences. Also undocumented on the dvds are the times we all spent together both before and after the actual performances of the cycles. In general, around 30 minutes or so was spent mingling before each performance; socialising after the performances sometimes went long into the night.

These recordings are snapshots of the experiences described in each chapter of this thesis. I intend them to be observed as a record of the events of this performance-based research journey, rather than as testament to my ability to successfully convey the themes under discussion or my competence in the field of classical performance voice.

**Performance 1**

**Performance 2**
Mahler *Kindertotenlieder*/Mussorgsky *Songs and Dances of Death*. Pianist: Stephen Emmerson.

**Performance 3**
Butterworth *Bredon Hill and Other Songs* and *Six Songs from A Shropshire Lad*/ Vaughan Williams *Songs of Travel*. Pianist: Leanne Swanson.
References


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