

OLD-FASHIONED LOVE SONGS



AARON GRAD, ELECTRIC THEORBO
AUGUSTINE MERCANTE, COUNTERTENOR

OLD-FASHIONED LOVE SONGS

PART I

Toccata No. 2 (“Arpeggiata”) from *Libro primo d'intavolatura di chitarrone* (1604)

Johann Hieronymus Kapsberger

Preamble

Aaron Grad

***Come again! Sweet love doth now invite* (1597)**

Music by John Dowland; Lyrics by Anonymous

Music Theory

Aaron Grad

***I attempt from love's sickness from The Indian Queen* (1695)**

Music by Henry Purcell; Lyrics by John Dryden and Sir Robert Howard

Am I Worthy?

Aaron Grad

Self-Reflection

Aaron Grad

***The Non-Pareil* (c. 1745)**

Music by William Boyce; Lyrics by Anonymous

Risk Management

Aaron Grad

***Kissing in the Dark* (1863)**

Music by Stephen Foster; Lyrics by George Cooper

Risk Management (Redux)

Aaron Grad

***Love is Here to Stay* (1937)**

Music by George Gershwin; Lyrics by Ira Gershwin

PART II

Dopamine

Aaron Grad

Battle Cry

Aaron Grad

Romanza (c. 1900)

Anonymous

Love in a Minor Key

Aaron Grad

Speak Low (1943)

Music by Kurt Weill; Lyrics by Ogden Nash

I struggle in our time, an age so fast

Aaron Grad

Time After Time (1983)

Cyndi Lauper and Rob Hyman

The Poetics of Loss

Aaron Grad

Come Away with Me (2002)

Norah Jones

Commissioned by the Music Center at Strathmore.

Old-Fashioned Love Songs features an electric theorbo designed and built by Aaron Grad in 2012.

Notes on the Program

By Aaron Grad

This evening of music, *Old-Fashioned Love Songs*, grew out of two impulses that developed in parallel. The first was my desire to write words and music that expressed the infinite affection, devotion and trust I feel for the love of my life: my wife, Jen. I have written poems and love songs for her before, but I could never say enough in a fourteen-line sonnet or a four-minute pop song; my ideas were too expansive, my execution too mannered. I wanted a platform that would give me space to luxuriate in the subject of love, and yet one that would nudge me to be unflinchingly open and honest.

The other idea that gnawed at me was an obsession with building a new instrument. What I had in mind was something in the harp-guitar family, combining a normal, fretted neck along with bass strings tuned in a scale, as on a harp. I found myself drawn to the theorbo, a member of the lute family that emerged in Italy in the late-1500's. I first saw and heard this giraffe-necked instrument playing *basso continuo* in a production of Monteverdi's *L'Orfeo*, and I fell in love with its sonorous bass notes and smooth chord voicings. Many variants of the theorbo existed throughout its 150 years of active duty around Europe, but I took my pattern from that early Italian type, called the chitarrone. I designed my new instrument with seven fretted strings—tuned in the traditional “re-entrant” pattern, which drops the top two strings into a lower octave—and seven bass strings, descending from the note F (a semitone higher than the low E on a normal guitar) down to G, well below a cello's range.

I set out to hybridize this instrument with an electric guitar, to give it a sound and function in line with my own musical language. Designing and building the world's first electric theorbo involved more than two years of trial, error, inspiration, and sometimes dumb luck. I was grateful for the help I received from friends and family through a Kickstarter crowdfunding campaign, which allowed me to acquire the specialized tools, lumber and hardware I needed. (I also offer my deepest thanks to Strathmore, which offered commissioning funds and a performance date at a point when this project was barely more than a thought in my head.)

My research led me to a reinforced carbon fiber tube to support the bass strings, which exert nearly 200 pounds of combined tension over their 40-inch span. I developed a maple sheath to hold the tube within a semi-hollow body; I repurposed harp levers to allow me to raise the pitch of each bass string by a half-step; I milled a bridge out of ebony to hold an array of fourteen guitar saddles to support the strings; I mounted lightweight, gearless tuners upside-down on the body, so the instrument would be balanced and not too heavy; I incorporated claro walnut salvaged from a California walnut grove, spalted maple from Washington state, and black limba from Africa, via an Oregon lumber yard. I bought a used router off of Craigslist, borrowed a band saw and a drill press, and found a woodworker's co-op that let me access a planer. Even the strings had to be custom made for me, given their extreme length.

As I built the electric theorbo, my plan for *Old-Fashioned Love Songs* came into focus. To match this new-old instrument, I enlisted a countertenor: my friend Augustine Mercante, a master of that alto-range vocal style inextricably linked with music from earlier eras. I assembled the work as an evening of music that would interweave my own original songs with arrangements of love songs spanning from the sixteenth century to the twenty-first. I came to see that *Old-Fashioned Love Songs* would touch on more than just this moment in my life and relationship; it became a meditation on the complex interplay of love and time.

Part I of *Old-Fashioned Love Songs* explores the thrilling, terrifying and humbling process of falling in love. A spoken epigraph leads into the palette-cleansing **Toccata “Arpeggiata,”** composed by one of the early pioneers of the theorbo, Johann Hieronymus Kapsberger. Continuing without pause, the **Preamble** sets the stage, incorporating looping and delay effects to broaden the sonic reach of the electric theorbo.

The English lutenist and singer John Dowland was a master of the heartsick love song, and he captured the sweet agony of love in *Come again! Sweet love doth now invite*. I first heard that song as a music student at New York University, where I also met my future wife. *Music Theory* chortles at our initial stage of pre-courtship, when I began to understand that for harmony to be meaningful (be it musical or personal harmony), tensions and modulations must arise. I know I was not the first to find the onset of love overwhelming; Henry Purcell expressed that sentiment so beautifully in an aria, *I attempt from love’s sickness*, from *The Indian Queen*. (The irony here is that his music is for the most part quite joyous, as if admitting, with a wink, that the affliction of love is actually worth the cost.)

The sobering, clear-eyed recognition of love brings a question, pondered by the voice alone: *Am I Worthy?* An interlude for solo theorbo, *Self-Reflection*, makes this question internal—for is love not the ultimate mirror? This line of thought continues in *The Non-Pareil* by William Boyce, an English composer who worked in the shadow of Handel. The song celebrates “charming Chloe,” who does not need the latest fashions or sparkling jewelry, but whose integrity demands the same from any suitor.

With love so close at hand, the inevitable process of *Risk Management* begins, weighing the dangers of rejection against the thrill of discovery. Sometimes, this stage brings pure giddiness, as expressed in a precious little Stephen Foster song, *Kissing in the Dark*. The elation spills over into *Risk Management (Redux)*, in which all doubts fall away. Part I ends with the Gershwin classic *Love is Here to Stay*, and the certainty that love will outlast even forces of nature.

If Part I of *Old-Fashioned Love Songs* is a case study in finding love, **Part II** is a survey of how love stands up to the ravages of time. First, we turn to science, courtesy of two neuroscientists who are a husband-and-wife research team and also dear friends of mine, Andrea Stocco and Chantel Prat. *Dopamine* examines the chemical process of love as it relates to time, while *Battle Cry* puts the preservation of love into action among the hum-drum realities of life, a “battleground of dirty dishes and unfolded laundry,” as the song says.

The proceedings turn more serious with the *Romanza*, an anonymous Spanish guitar tune. A contrasting section re-frames the somber melody in a major key, but in this arrangement the minor key prevails (for now). A linking passage flows into the song that is the emotional core of the work, *Love in a Minor Key*. The subject here is not the ebullient, new love of Part I of *Old-Fashioned Love Songs*, but the deep, wizened, unshakable love that says, “Still we love without precaution, love through sour moods, love among the squabbles. / We will love until our hair turns gray and we have lost all our marbles.”

Speak Low, with music by Kurt Weill and lyrics by Ogden Nash, distills the collision of time and love into one of the most perfect couplets of any popular song, heard in the bridge: “Time is so old, and love so brief. / Love is pure gold, and time a thief.” *I struggle in our time, an age so fast* resumes the perspective of the bard-like voice first introduced in the Preamble, when he (I) acknowledged that this “approach may be outdated.” The song is something of a manifesto for the entire endeavor of *Old-Fashioned Love Songs*, an argument that “love’s fashion never fades.” The text takes the form of a Shakespearean sonnet, and the final lines circulate as a musical round. The last chord dovetails into the first of these love songs written in my lifetime, Cyndi Lauper’s *Time After Time*. Beneath its earworm of a melody and the mid-80’s nostalgia it conjures, it is a haunting cry of love straining against the distancing effects of time, as “the second hand unwinds” and “the drum beats out time.”

The Poetics of Loss finally addresses with soul-baring honesty the reality that time represents: an inevitable separation, in the form of death. This reprise of *Love in a Minor Key* offers no rebuttal. It simply asks for presence and connection in the face of the unknown.

The narrative closes with an old-fashioned love song from our present century, *Come Away With Me*, by Norah Jones. In the context of the preceding song, the undefined “away” takes on a deeper meaning. The final cadence stretches into a reminiscence of the hopeful, major-key variant of the *Romanza*, until the music comes full circle to the unsullied promise of Kapsberger’s *Toccata*, its arpeggios dissipating into spectral harmonics.



Composer and guitarist **Aaron Grad** (b. 1980) merges his rock and jazz roots with his classical training to create music that *The Washington Post* has described as “inventive and notably attractive.” Born in Alexandria, Virginia, Grad was a listless student of piano and violin from age five. At ten he started fresh on guitar, and was soon writing songs, forming bands, and playing his first jazz gigs. Grad moved to New York in 1998 to study jazz guitar at New York University; while completing his degree, he performed with his own groups at The Knitting Factory and Cornelia St. Café, founded a concert series at Judson Memorial Church, and worked for Tim Berne’s Screwgun Records. His prizes include an ASCAP Foundation Morton Gould Young Composer Award for the Concertino for Clarinet (2005) and an ASCAP Foundation Young Jazz Composer Award for *Confused Blues* (2007). Grad received his master’s degree in Composition in 2008 from the Peabody Conservatory, where he studied with Christopher Theofanidis. Recent projects include the CD release of *The Father Book*, arrangements commissioned by the North Carolina Symphony, and *The Lost Voice*, an original fable for voice and chamber ensemble performed for young audiences in Seattle. Besides composing concert music, Grad enjoys improvising with friends and writing silly songs. He is also the program annotator for the Orpheus Chamber Orchestra, Saint Paul Chamber Orchestra, New World Symphony and others. Grad lives in Seattle with his wife, Jen, and their cat, Codetta.

Described by *The New York Times* as a “glowing countertenor,” **Augustine Mercante** (b. 1980) enjoys an active career performing repertoire from the Baroque to the more recently created. This season he performs with both the Delaware Valley Chorale and the Brookhaven Choral Society (Dallas, Texas) in Purcell’s *Come, Ye Sons of Art*; with the Newark Symphony Orchestra for their holiday concert; with Brandywine Baroque for an all-Vivaldi program; and with composer Aaron Grad for the premiere of *Old-Fashioned Love Songs*, a cycle for countertenor and electric theorbo, an instrument that the composer created. Gus joined the American Spiritual Ensemble for tours of Ireland, France, Spain, the southern United States, and St. Paul, Minnesota, where he took part in a broadcast on Minnesota Public Radio. This summer he will make his Seattle debut in recital with Aaron Grad and appear as a Fellow at the Oregon Bach Festival. In 2013, Gus was awarded an Individual Artist Fellowship from the Delaware Division of the Arts. He was also a Vocal Fellow at the Tanglewood Music Center, where his performance in the American premiere of George Benjamin’s *Written on Skin* was described by the Wall Street Journal as “riveting,” with a voice that “soared above the texture, lining the text with the haloed elegance of gold-leaf inscription.” As a 2010 Fulbright Scholar, Gus completed post-graduate studies in Augsburg, Germany, with soprano Edith Wiens. He also holds degrees from the University of North Texas and the University of Delaware. Gus is the founder of LifeSongs, an organization that provides financial assistance to exemplary charities, individuals with special needs, and noteworthy community-centered projects. He and his partner, Justin, live in Wilmington, Delaware, where Gus maintains a private teaching studio and serves on the faculty of The Music School of Delaware.