

Passions

A New Oratorio by the participants of the 2021 N.E.O. Voice Festival

Introduction

In the oratorio tradition, the Passion exists as a subgenre that includes diverse examples like Bach's "St. Matthew Passion" and Webber's "Jesus Christ Superstar." That Passion story can be thought of as compassion on trial. The 2021 NEO Exploratorio, titled "Passions," inspired a months-long conversation around a word "passion" whose meaning has occupied many different rooms across time, but has always been infused with powerful energy. In the end, the 2021 Exploratorio became a story of compassion with wings, a kaleidoscope of the human ability to love during a year of isolation. As such, "Passions" explores suffering in the self as a portal to understanding suffering in others. Each movement, in its individual way, strains with the promise that this suffering can find relief.

The work begins with hope in "Altitude" and ends with hopefulness in "If I Could Make A Single Song." A loose narrative of the every-person begins in Part 1, moving through questions of desire, spirituality and purpose. Part 2 explores love mythologies, holding them to the light to expose the loss inherent in a belief system based in disappearing into another, and the inevitable fullness that comes from embracing loss as an essential inspiration in relationship. Part three structures new questions including those of faith "is life to be lived cloistered or among others?" self-love "can I find joy in sorrow?" the depths of loss "how do I define life without those I love near me?" and creativity "how can I reach out with beauty in this life?"

NEO's "Passions" is a collective story of the individual in a unique time when individuality in the pressure cooker of aloneness brought us closer to ourselves. It is the promise that art, the practice of creating, has the power to turn us toward compassion, and in the process, redeem us and our world.

- Dr. David Harris, NEO Festival Ensemble Director

Part 1

Altitude, by Conner Leigh Shaw

Soloist : Mira Fu-En Huang

Program Note

In this setting of Lola Ridge's poem, I sought to situate her emotion of longing within an art song. My musical language reaches for the desire to be with a partner in a place remote from the anger and pain that arises from existing on earth, with large intervallic leaps and dense, planing harmonies atop drones. The drone that opens and ends the piece to me emblemizes the unresolvable contradiction that we can never truly have a full, unblemished, and loving life while in this plane of existence. The musical lines that move against this drone represent the striving for moments of relief from pain and anger in our ephemeral life.

I want Goodness, by David Barton Harris

Soloist: Corona De Los Santos

Program Note

How are we to understand the passion of Jesus Christ? The story has a tendency to produce guilt in its audience, but this is the byproduct, not the purpose, of the crucifixion. *I Want Goodness*. *I want Sin* operates on the premise that the passion of Christ, more than anything else, is God's demonstration that earthly life is, by definition, suffering, it is a harsh reminder that God's creations should expect and face the ordeal of earthly life. Avoidance of pain is a denial of responsibility.

In *Brave New World*, Aldous Huxley imagined a future obsessed with comfort. In *I Want Goodness*. *I Want Sin*, our soloist sings the sentiments of *Brave New World's* "savage" protagonist, John. His message is in stark contrast to the rest of the choir, who praises *soma*, Huxley's population-sedating opiate.

At its crux, *I Want Goodness*. *I Want Sin* is a juxtaposition of comfort versus freedom. The chorus espouses a painless existence while the tenor soloist imagines a world of exploration and embraces the dangers it necessitates. Goodness and sin may seem like opposites, but they are both results of passion. The opposite of either is indifference.

The Story of Mary MacLane (I Await the Devil's Coming),
by Ruth Hertzman-Miller

Soloists: Chelsea Kolic and Tiffany Militante

Program Note

Mary MacLane was 19 years old in 1902 when she published *The Story of Mary MacLane*, a diary of her life in Butte, Montana. (Her working title was *I Await the Devil's Coming*.) The book details her frustration with having her passions and ambitions stifled because of her gender. She expresses her love for her “one friend” (a former teacher whom she calls the “anemone lady”) and her desire to achieve an “indescribable mad Happiness.” She imagines that “the Devil” can provide this happiness in exchange for Mary’s giving up “Fame, and Money, and Power, and Virtue, and Honor, and Righteousness, and Truth, and Logic, and Philosophy, and Genius.”

This duet for 2 sopranos, based on excerpts from MacLane’s book, speaks to the private, hidden passions that all of us harbor within ourselves and long to be able to share with others.

thin places, by James May

Soloists: Jasper Sussman and Eli Berman

Program Note

In Irish mythology, “thin places” are where the barrier between our world and the Otherworld becomes diffuse. The always-near spirit world becomes just slightly more tangible, a combination of circumstances that suggests something more than its parts.

Dublin, 1904—the setting of James Joyce’s *Ulysses*. The novel constantly teeters on the edge of comprehensibility into a gestalt shmeat, an impenetrably layered body of detail that asks you to situate yourself amidst the chaos.

thin places is not about *Ulysses*, or Irish mythology. But it is about discrete events articulating one another into a larger whole, and one’s position within that. It uses field recordings, graphic representations of the soundscape, text culled from the third episode of *Ulysses*, and the ancient Irish Ogham alphabet to devise an environment for improvisation. Spontaneous performance is about negotiation—and, in the right moment, tripping into something unexpected.

Where is the Voice I Heard..., By Helena Michelson

Soloists: Chelsea Kolic, Corona De Los Santos, and Mira Fu-En Huang

Program Note

Where is the Voice I Heard... is scored for two sopranos, tenor, and organ.

While researching for a suitable text on the intriguing subject of passion, I decided to search for several disparate sources. In my search, I came across a curious essay, "On Poetry In General" (1818), by William Hazlitt, English essayist and literary critic.

Several passages are particularly striking, especially Hazlitt's provocative definition of poetry: *Poetry is the language of the imagination and the passions.*

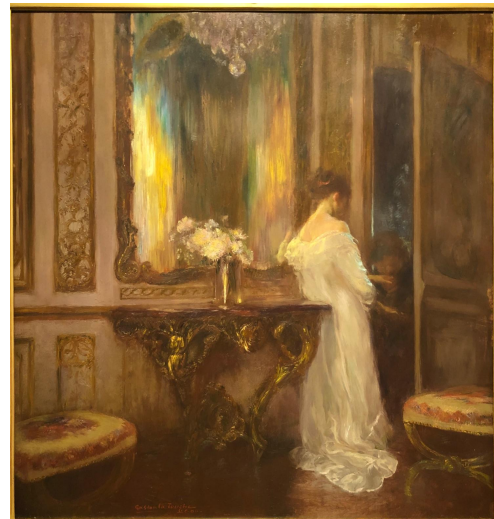
Altogether, the word passion (or its variant) is repeated 32 times! In my setting, several passages from that essay are combined with several verses from song #3 from Three Songs from the play "The Lamp and the Bell" by Edna St. Vincent Millay. Following the Elizabethan drama and meant for outdoor performance, "The Lamp and the Bell" is based on the fairy tale *Snow White and Rose Red*. Its underlying subject – friendship and love.

Part 2

The Sigh, by Hannah Gruendemann

Program Note

This piece is inspired by *The Suitor* (1900), a painting by Gaston de Latouche (shown below). I wanted to explore the sonic quality of being in love as shown by this painting: the flush of first infatuation in all its shimmering, mystical passion. There is no text; instead, the piece is set to a chorus of sighs which journey from anticipation towards the passionate resolution of a lover arriving.



Passion Chorale, by Amanda Cole

Program Note

Passion Chorale is a microtonal arrangement of Bach's Passion melody using just intonation tuning. Vowels are used to change the timbre of notes and to bring out different vocal overtones. Scored for SATB choir, the singers pitch the microtonal notes by listening to a reference track. The notes of the Passion melody are tuned to either the C or G harmonic series and the G from both series is held as a drone throughout.

You Have to Wind It, by Katie Wilkes

Program Note

The text of *You Have to Wind It* was inspired by the short story of the same name written by my dear friend and talented writer, Paige Prudhon. As a collaborative effort, some of her words have been stitched to mine to form this text. From the story, we focused on the strong symbol of the mechanical pocket watch. We believed it could also serve in this case as a symbol for our personal pursuits, relationships, and the passions we manifest in our lives. They need constant care and maintenance just like a mechanical watch needs to be wound every day. By the act of winding, we are purposefully building tension and momentum so it may keep turning for the next day to come. Holding this in our hands, we must remember to show up each day to wind it, again and again.

The Kiss, by Mickie Wadsworth

Soloist: Eli Berman

Program Note

What is passion? That is a question that I asked myself when writing *The Kiss* and this poem immediately came to mind. As an aro and ace person I see our society saturated in one idea of passion. I would often find myself expecting the idea of passion in places where it would never come to fruition. Due to this I have a hard time separating passion from its romantic and sexual connotations. I wrote *The Kiss* as a reaction to the baggage tied to the word. One question continues to ring in my mind... "What happens when reality doesn't match our expectations?"

In My Lonely Hours, by Lauren Spavelko

Soloists: Elise Brancheau and Jasper Sussman

Program Note

In composing this, I was attracted to two ideas about the concept of "passion." 1) Is passion something we choose and chase, something that drives us and dictates our behavior (ex: to be "ruled by greed"), or something like a tug-of-war between the two? 2) *Compassion* means "together in suffering." Which emotion causes me great suffering?

This duet depicts a conversation with the self. The Narrator is weary of dealing with Loneliness, who never seems to leave her. Each causes the other pain, frustration, and anxiety. Both share the same needs and desires, but have different ideas about how to meet them. The Narrator wants to choose from a place of wholeness, but Loneliness does not trust her to take care of them and has lived too long in a deficit. Loneliness wants to alleviate her suffering, but the Narrator does not trust Loneliness to choose well for them—Loneliness makes compromises that temporarily soothe but eventually cause more pain. Ultimately, the two are brought into mutual understanding through compassion (indeed, self-compassion). [Read the song text here.](#)

Leaf Mold, by Jasper Sussman

Soloists: Elise Brancheau and Natalie Buickians

Program Note

Please listen and enjoy!

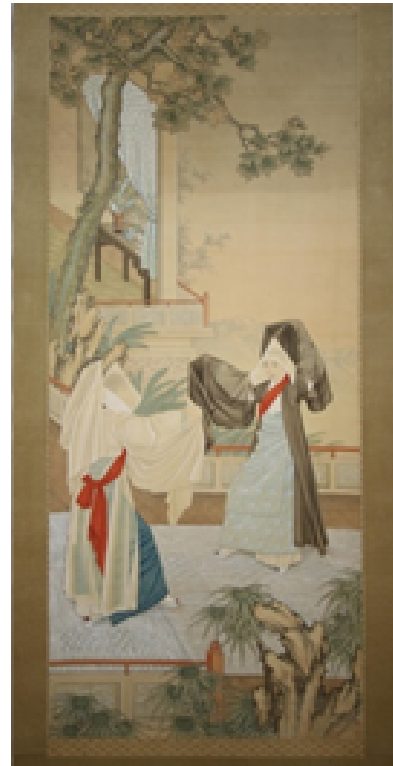
Part 3

Nun's dance, by Joogwang Lim

program note

Nun's dance or *Seung-mu*(승무) is a traditional Korean dance, performed by a solo female dancer who dressed as a Buddhist nun. Although not an official part of the Buddhist ritual, this dance is considered to symbolize the process from mortal suffering to enlightenment.

While Chi-hun Cho (1920-1968), a Korean poet illustrates its elegance and beauty, he also features an unusual type of passion, "the passion for submission." by using contrasting visual images. Her motion is elegant and refined, but her mind is full of agony and desire for liberation from her sufferings. Although the dance is full of artistic beauty, she stands away from such earthly matters. At the end, her strong passion is condensed and sublimated as a peaceful prayer. This whole spiritual process is represented by the timbral and motivic contrast and eventual reconciliation between the choir and the solo soprano voice.



The Answer, by Emily Joy Sullivan

Soloist: Katherine Fuller Parker

Program Notes

In seeking texts to set on the topic of the Passions during the lovely brainstorming phase of NEO, fellow participants introduced me to the poet Sara Teasdale, and I immediately fell in love with her poem "[The Answer](#)." I was moved by the text's emotional, intense approach to life that was somehow also so grounded, providing a sense of deep meaning in the face of life's inevitable end. It struck me as being a profoundly spiritual poem, as well as a deeply impassioned one. Furthermore, the idea of "passion" figured into my process, not just content: After a year of pandemic projects that often applied a very conceptual approach, I allowed my compositional process for this art song to be more intuitive, organic, and emotionally-driven.

Dream Elegy, by Timothy Peterson

Soloists: Natalie Buickians and Chelsea Kolic

Program Note

Dream Elegy sets to music an excerpt of the eponymous poem by Catherine Pond. I first met Catherine in 2018 at the University of Southern California, where we were enrolled in a graduate seminar that paired composers with poets to collaborate on vocal works; I have since had the pleasure of setting her words to music on several occasions. Catherine wrote "Dream Elegy" in memory of her best friend's brother, who passed away when they were teenagers. I hope to evoke the bond between Catherine and her friend's late brother through the soprano duo's counterpoint. Feelings of closeness are musicalized through parallel motion and harmonic unisons; feelings of apartness, through contrary and oblique motion. Voice crossings blur the distinction between each soprano's identity, reflecting both the dreamlike setting of Catherine's poem and the intimate and orbital nature of the reunion imagined therein.

If I Could Make a Single Song, Jamey J Guzman

Program Note

This setting of Sara Teasdale's *Compensation* explores both the *expression* of passion and emotion in art, and the passion found *within* the creative process itself. The choir embodies the internal dialogue of an artist struggling to create, drowning in the guilt of knowing that even as they follow their passion, they still struggle to be happy. The motif of "I should be glad" haunts them as they fight toward what they see as their salvation: "*I should be glad...If I could make a single song.*" The multiple definitions of "should," from a prediction to a condition to a guilt-laden expectation, shroud any progress in ambiguity. It is not until the final moments that the artist realizes: in expressing their emotions into the poem, even the discordant, non-songlike ones, they *have* created a moment full of light. It takes that moment of triumph to notice: finally, they feel glad.