

Program Notes

The 2022 Exploratorio: "The Signified"

Part 1: Rainbows

E Kuini E Kapi'olani - Thomas Goedecke

E Kuini e Kapi'olani is a mele inoa (name chant) of Queen Kapi'olani, wife to King Kalākaua who is credited as being the ali'i to bring hula back into practice in the late 19th century. This reverence for traditional practices was shared with Kapi'olani, as she shared the vision of ho'oulu lāhui (increasing the nation). She did so by creating many medical facilities across the islands, as well as tending to sacred spaces both of the Hawaiian Church and of the resting places of ali'i. Her name "ka pi'o lani" (the arch of the heavens) is a reference to rainbows, a strong image of chiefs in Hawai'i.

One of the beauties of mele inoa is that there can be many interpretations of a name. In this chant, the central image is that of a rainbow, and how that rainbow can take on many different refractions in the sky. It brings in images of the highest heavens, the lani-est of lani, and of those who revere the heavens and higher rainbows such as the lower rainbows (lower chiefs) and priests. Her work as a proponent of ho'oulu lāhui is referenced, while also connecting the people of Ni'ihau to the reverence of the queen in front of them.

My hope with this piece is to hold space for this reverence, the act of interpretation, the act of signifying and being Signified. The sound of a western choir is not foreign to Hawaiian music, in fact the ali'i of the Hawaiian Kingdom of the 19th century were regularly practicing western music alongside music that was endemically Hawaiian (<https://youtu.be/pOJwrjAoNNA>). I am inspired by the ways in which western choral and Hawaiian traditions have blended over the last few centuries, and have endeavored to bring these two timbral worlds into the same sonic space by articulating distinctive resonant strategies through contrasting note heads. It is a continuation of centuries' practice begun by composers like Queen Lili'uokalani, who learned from Henri Berger, a student of Richard Strauss and continued that practice through a strong lineage of music makers that lives vibrantly today, incorporating timbres and textures of western ensembles and bringing it into focus through a Hawaiian lens.

E Kuini e Kapi'olani	Queen Kapi'olani
Nou e ke ahi pi'o i ka lewa	Yours is the arched flame of the sky
'Ike kō Kahiki kupu eu	Seen by the spirits of the Kahiki
Ua lohe o Kuaihelani	Heard by the highest and most sacred heavens
I ke kono a ka uakoko	Invited by the earth-clinging rainbows/rainbow-sparkling rain
Me ka 'alae nui a Hina	And the great mud hen of Hina, goddess of the moon
Nāna i ho'opuni nā moku	She who traveled the islands
Kahiko nā kaha o Nalani	Beautifying the ancient dwelling of the chiefs
Ha'ina mai ka puana	This is the end of our praise

In the Beginning - Michael Conley

In the beginning (in the beginning of time to say the least) there were the compasses.

Whirling in void their feet traced out beginnings and endings, beginning and end in a single line.

Wisdom danced also in circles for these were her kingdom.

The sun spun, worlds whirled, the seasons came round, and all things went their rounds;
but in the beginning, beginning and end were in one.

And in the beginning was love. Love made a sphere, and all things grew within it.

The sphere then encompassed beginnings and endings, beginning and end. Love had a compass whose whirling dance traced out a sphere of love in the void;

in the center thereof rose a fountain. –"Morning" from *The Circus of the Sun* (1959) by Robert Lax

American mystical poet Robert Lax (1915-2000) was born and died in Olean, New York, and educated at Columbia University where he met and cultivated a life-long friendship with Thomas Merton. He had college level teaching jobs, was a poetry editor at The New Yorker and Time magazines, traveled with the circus as a juggler and clown, and eventually made his way to the Greek Isles where he settled in Kalymnos before moving on to Patmos. He spent over three decades in a kind of self-exile on the Isle of Patmos, which was already well-known for the work of another exiled mystic, John of Patmos, who authored the Book of Revelation (the concluding book of the New Testament).

Loren Webster writes of Lax “The concept of circles and spheres is inherent in almost all the earliest religions but also seems central to Lax’s philosophy, particularly spheres. Since Love is also central to his vision, it’s not surprising to see him tie the two together in the phrase “Love made a sphere.” In *The Way of the Dreamcatcher* when Georgiou asks “And how do we nurture and sustain?” Lax replies, “Through unconditional love. That’s the bottom line, son. Everything is here because of love. That’s why we were created — to love, and creation was set up to make love possible. Love keeps things going, not just for now, but for forever. Love gives life and makes sure what’s around today will be around tomorrow. It’s about compassion, it’s what the cosmos best responds to...”

For “The Signified” exploratorio I was particularly drawn to the circularity of this poem, the idea that any label we give to a weighty concept can be turned around on itself, does not lend itself to facile definition. Beginning and end, spheres, circles, round and rounds, spinning and whirling, the infinite void but also a clear straight line—all these signifiers and concepts revolving around each other in circles, evading clarity—leading to what seems to be Lax’s conclusion, that all this dancing and circling is ultimately defining love. We still don’t know what it means, but somehow it is both beginning and end and everything in between. It is the engine that runs the cosmos.

I tried to capture that feeling of both infinite void and regenerative circularity in this brief piece in various ways. One, I used a mixolydian scale (a major scale with a flat 7th) but with the addition of an augmented 4th. I like the feel of this scale because it is intentionally vague, it doesn’t seem to resolve, it is somehow circular—up or down it just goes on without coming to rest. As counter-material I used two alternating stacks of 4ths, because if you keep going up or down in a series of fourths you essentially never land on any key center, which helps subvert the feeling of predictable tonality and furthers the idea of both void and circles. Melodically, both the organ and the voice use many different motives and figurations that are circular, either traveling up and right back down, or orbiting around a central static note. I had the idea of a higher being singing this song, like a demi-god or a muse, maybe a little all-knowing and removed, but also playful and sympathetic: an oracle guiding us gently towards love.

Many Ways - Max Eidnoff

The quote by Danish theological philosopher, Søren Kierkegaard, which serves as the text for this piece conveys a simple truth which is often overlooked. The idea that someone can be deceived by believing that which is false is obvious, but it is easy to forget the phenomenon of deception by refusal to believe truth. This concept resonates with me because it has been at the core of the political sphere I have witnessed since my late teenage years. Bipartisan polarization has resulted in a battle of opposing “truths.” As a result, truth has become an empty signifier to validate whatever one wants to assign to it.

The paradox of this situation is that such a treatment of the term “truth” is by definition contradictory to the meaning of truth. My goals in writing this piece, however, were to musically depict deception and to convey the unity within both types of deception Kierkegaard describes. Both types, while different in character, are essentially the same in that they result in deception. To start, I have fragmented the text down to individual words and phonemes.

This technique in conjunction with repetition results in the piece beginning with textual obscurity. Gradually the phrases of text are constructed into full phrases but both types of deception are sung in an overlapping manner, making them indifferntiable. It is not until the very last section of the piece that all the voices gloriously exclaim the entirety of the text in its intended order by the author, without contradictory overlapping.

"One can be deceived in many ways; one can be deceived by believing that which is not true, but one can also be deceived by not believing that which is true."

–Søren Kierkegaard

Pink/Blue - Socks Whitmore

It may come as no surprise to hear that this is a piece about the gender norms and stereotypes that are still heavily present in contemporary society. Written for the 2022 N.E.O. Voice Festival Exploratorio, "The Signified," Pink/Blue presents two lists of items, activities, professions, and even creatures that have historically had a "feminine" or "masculine" meaning assigned to them, despite being inherently gender neutral.

The gendering of the non-gendered has created an oppressive set of strictures for both transgender and cisgender people. To say an object or pastime is exclusively "female" or "male" not only discourages cisgender humans from enjoying interests considered non-conforming to their gender, but also pressures transgender humans into abandoning interests associated with their gender assigned at birth in order to be considered valid. (For instance, cisgender boys are told dresses are too girly for them to wear, and transgender men or transmasculine nonbinary people can feel afraid to publicly wear dresses for fear of being seen as female.) While having interest in gender-coded things that align with your gender identity is valid and vital—cis and trans women whose love for dresses feels inherent to their girlhood should absolutely continue to enjoy dresses—this piece is specifically about the true absurdity of making rules for what gender an interest makes you.

In a perhaps unusual reversal of roles, the vocalist is at the whims of the pianist in this piece. The pianist is in charge of the vocalist's "gender presentation," symbolizing the dictation of societal pressures. The piece also ends in the middle of the piano, the "non-binary" pitch range, because there are no popular conceptions of objects, activities, or professions that have been deemed gender non-binary, and thus the vocalist runs out things to say.

Part 2: Containers

Seeing That - O-Lan Jones

The theme of "The Signified" inspired the idea of the difference between a shallow, mental noticing of something (in this case a Tree) and the glimpses we can feel of its vibrant life.

The choir begins with short, percussive words like "click" and "twig." The trio then emerges expressing the life of being a tree, the choir joins with its own response to feeling this life, a sense of the music spilling out of its ordinary cage of perception, then abruptly the Seeing is over and the choir is back with its automatic shallow perceptions, with fragments of the trio still heard for a while.

The thing with feathers - Travis Reynolds

When setting text, I'm driven first and foremost by musical impulse, and I think of my art-songs as companion pieces to the poems they set. The poem provides structure and musical impulse, but the music is a separate piece of art with its own internal logic and expression. After all, there's nothing particularly melancholy about Dickinson's poem, which is the pervading mood of this piece.

What I liked in setting this poem for "The Signified" was how my process, and perhaps Dickinson's process, played into the theme of N.E.O's oratorio project. Here is Dickinson, uncovering some personal truth from a bird, and here is me taking Dickinson's poem and uncovering some personal truth through music. My music ultimately has very little to do with Dickinson, just as Dickinson's poem has very little to do with birds. And yet we're able to find personal meaning from these symbols and discover something about ourselves. My setting here is mostly through-composed, except that I treat the line "and sings the tune without the words", as a refrain. The final refrain turns into a vocalise in which the singer is free to improvise, and the piano part is a literal transcription of myself improvising. Without any lyrics "the tune" is now symbolic, free to be interpreted by me, the performer, and by you.

No Document - Oliver John Cameron

In 2021, as Sydney was heading into another lockdown, I started reading Anwen Crawford's book, "No Document." Memories of my encounters with this text as strewn with images of solitude, overthinking and walks at sunset after a day spent looking at a screen.

Crawford's essay is an elegy for her friendship and artistic partnership with Ned Sevil which was cut short by death in 2010. Her memories are shaded into a void of grief that cannot be filled, outlined with etymological and political sketches of the state of Australia and Australian art. Throughout the book are rectangles: windows and billboards that attempt to structure the nothingness of a blank page. So much of what we value is not and cannot be documented. Art is so often destroyed, defaced or simply lost. With grief and memory, and through the art we create, we attempt to document what can never be fully captured, but it is a process that moves us forward nonetheless.

Part 3: numbers:srebmun

the glory is fallen out of - Ruth Hertzman-Miller

I first read "the glory is fallen out of" in high school when we were learning about the idea of the "golden age" in literature. Many world literatures have a concept of a "golden age" or paradise that is generally thought to have existed in the past and is contrasted with our modern age, which is more complex and demanding. The psychologist Carl Jung suggested that the "golden age" is our idealized recollection of infancy as a time when we were completely cared for.

In Cummings' poem, the golden age is represented visually and conceptually by words like "gold," "shining," "shimmering," "glory," and "splendor." He contrasts these terms with words that represent a harsh awakening to current reality: for example, "dead," "spasm in the dust," "crumple them." He juxtaposes these contrasts in the last few lines, mingling the positive imagery of "straight glad feet fearruining and glorygirded faces" with the sober directive, "lead us into the serious steep darkness."

In my work as a physician caring for geriatric patients, I have come to recognize the joy and satisfaction of caring for people at the end of life and guiding their final journeys in a way that is consistent with their wishes. I feel that this poem expresses the profound mixture of joy and sadness that comes with providing end-of-life care.

the glory is fallen out of
the sky the last immortal
leaf
is

dead and the gold
year
a formal spasm
in the

dust
this is the passing of all shining things
therefore we also
blandly

into receptive
earth,O let
us
descend

take
shimmering wind
these fragile splendors from
us crumple them hide

them in thy breath drive
them in nothingness
for we
would sleep

this is the passing of all shining things
no lingering no backward-
wondering be unto
us O

soul,but straight
glad feet fearruining
and glorygirded
faces

lead us
into the
serious
steep

darkness

[e. e. cummings, published as "Amores V" in *Tulips and Chimneys*, 1923. Public domain.]

Gold and Blue - Lydia Jane Pugh

In all honesty, initially the concept of 'The Signified' alluded me - I couldn't think of what to write, or what that meant to me, and I found my creative brain completely clouded by other projects and personal issues. It was by chance that I was driving one day and drove past a property with the flag of The Ukraine flying in their front garden, and I was struck by the striking contrast between the flag colours; Gold (well, yellow) and Blue. Flags, although often simply in design are usually overflowing with meaning. The Ukraine's flag symbolises the blue sky atop the golden wheat fields. I found myself drawn to this idea of the internal struggle we all face; our 'blue' side (fear, anxiety, depression, hardships, loss, grief) against our 'gold' (joy, success, freedom, love etc). Sometimes these sides of us are conflicting, sometimes we feel they are very separate, but really they always are complex and intertwined with each other.

Again when writing this piece, I couldn't find any poetry or text that said all that I wanted to say, or with the right tone, so I took it upon myself to write my own text. Although not a direct poem about the war in The Ukraine, the conflict itself inspires a lot of the wording, and seeks to convey the idea that although conflict and hardship are ongoing, hope and resolution can be found.

Coloured Night, darkened days. Silent fear, mournful haze. Wakeful dreams, nightmare eyes.

In my heart I ache for truth... Broken Gold and Blue...

My soul cries for you.

Burning thoughts, why on whys. Burning cities burnt by lies. Nightmare visions unforeseen.

In my heart I ache for truth... Bleeding Gold and Blue

My soul cries

For mornings when the birds will sing again. Evenings when the moonlight shines anew.

Imprinted in my mind, the colours of my life and tattooed on my heart from day to day.

Tattooed on my heart in every way!

Coloured night, darkened days.

The threat returns, my pride remains. Blue and Gold, the hurt untold,

And the strength that comes from truth, When you know not what to do.

Hold on, Gold and Blue,

I will stand for you.

Lydia Jane Pugh

25 V 780 #194. - Haeyun Kim

Vocal music can deliver a 'message' more directly since it has text, compared to instrumental music. The intention of this piece is not to pertain to this traditional and ordinary concept but to flip it, by getting rid of 'Signified' and leave music itself, which is 'Signifier' that doesn't have meaning, only. To achieve this, this music is named as '25-V-70 #194' that is not possible to assume the definition, and doesn't have texts (lyric). Thereby, the message that the composer intends to convey is hidden, and performers who sing the music merely carry out as deliverers. Audience will receive music itself that doesn't contain particular meaning. However, ironically, when audiences listen to this musical texture, they will have their own messages and titles that come to each one's mind. In conclusion, the music that lost their message from the composer will create diverse and numerous messages by the audience.

Performers including a solist, can set texts in the way they want. Or it is also possible to use texts that composer arbitrarily set, which is to read numbers or signs used in titles in diverse language.

(Example)

- Du (Deux) - Two in French (spell out as it sounds)
 - O - Five in Korean
- *so 'Du-O' is same as 25 - Sieben - Seven in German

To deepen ambiguity and make ambience, various vowels and humming sounds are also used. Performers may wear a veil or turn around and play to hide their facial expression, so that the audience will receive only music, excluding any other information about the music.

June (On procrastination). - Vera Lugo

June (On procrastination) is an introspective declaration masquerading as a study of symmetry. While considering the concept of “The Signified”, I happened upon a TikTok featuring an inebriated man halfway through recording what sounded like a Russian-Gibberish recitation. He finished his speech and promptly hit reverse on his recording device. Suddenly, the English alphabet was intelligible – albeit in a very funny semi-Slavic accent. And thus was born June.

Once the concept for the piece was solidified, I got a head start on... nothing. Either because of having too much to do and feeling burned out or not having enough to do and therefore no motivation to do, the piece sat undeveloped for some time. Deadlines loomed and I felt worse and worse about having nothing to show but a cool idea.

Then, after a particularly sad night of complaining to my partner about how I'd felt this same cyclical pressure my entire life and never learned to overcome it (having skated through school thanks to teachers who graded me based on my ability rather than my work ethic), I realized that here, finally, was the spark I needed.

The text is honest. Its inversions are unmeditated and indicate the closed loop of procrastination. The melodic lines and accompaniment sometimes reflect the unmitigated joy of creation, and sometimes they reinforce the feelings of guilt and disappointment that come with chronic off-putting.

June was due June 1st, 2022.

-VL, June 14, 2022

siTH nih cuts fiahl eeahm la
funih oon stin oo moon New moon, it's new enough
All my life Stuck in this...

eezy'ehrk kneewuhg maaah m'going crazy!

oot dnrrel rävonn Ah! Nnnolluh Alone Ah! Never learned to

dr w'roff kneevahm urrvend n'yahm
yahm vuhk ab uTH nih meTH t'peh ky'ah
n'ruhl oot d'aa hy'ah zäss-natch əTH vəl lah dnaa

SiTH THnih cuts
draw hzihngew wergh Growing is hard
Stuck in this

And all of the chances I had to learn
I kept them in the back of my
mind. Never moving forward

I
am
fine!

Sometimes I take my time
letting the water flow inside
Stillness takes me
Its quiet hands ease my mind
forgetting knee deg r'oaaf
d'ny'ahm ny'ahm zee zna'ht eh yee'owk stih
eem skate sin ll'its
dyahahss nih wuh'llf roet ah ah'oo uTH ng'ih del
my'aht y'ahm k'yehate ih'ah zmyut muss

nih'off
maa
yah

dr w'roff kneevahm urrven

Part 4: Love

I love - Skyelar Ginsberg

I dislike program notes and score notes. I'll admit that it's partly because I hate writing them, but it's partly because I don't like the idea of telling someone how to experience my music. I strive to give life to music that speaks on its own, that says something different to each person who hears it. Especially with a surrealist text—something that, in its very nature, escapes concrete meaning—it feels strange to tell you what this piece is supposed to mean. Instead, I'll tell you what it means to me—and you're more than welcome to ignore me.

This piece is about two people trying not to say I love you.

—Skyelar Ginsberg, June 2022

I love
Jacques-Bernard Brunius (1944)
Translation by Mary Ann Caws

I love sliding I love upsetting everything
I love coming in I love sighing
I love taming the furtive manes of hair
I love hot I love tenuous

And Still, The Birds Sing - Judy A. Rose

This piece started off as a tribute to the imagined voices of black women who have had their voices silenced because of racial violence. I had been thinking about the last words of Breonna Taylor and the young woman in Pennsylvania whose 18 year old life was ended by a white man engaging in driving rage and he ended up shooting the young black woman in the head as she went off the road. I was thinking about this as I had recently recorded an excerpt from Ida B. Wells's "Lynching Is The New Color Line Murder" for Damien Geter's "African American Requiem" educational brochure. I had started off the piece by titling it "And Still, the Robin Sings and decided to change it as I wanted to include all of the songbirds that had been showing up in our yard. In working on this curriculum, we have heard Eric Garner and George Floyd's last words as they were recorded. We did not hear Breonna's last words and somewhere it seems to make it "less" of a crime because here we are squawking over what her last words might have been. She died a senseless death, nuff said.

I had originally thought I wanted to write a piece in which I used some of the Ida B Wells text of Lynching is the new color line murder and thought about infusing Breonna Taylor's mothers or aunts words. Sort of like a hybrid juxtaposition of both texts.

All of this changed when I learned my mentor I've known for over 30 years suffered a stroke and she has been steadily working on whether she will stay on this plane. She has been a mother for me and to many who have been abandoned. I am forever grateful for the time she took to mentor me. My mentor, Mary H. Kogen is the reason I am teaching and one of the reasons I am composing. She encouraged me to write, even when I was not feeling it. She said that I have a talent and need to use it. I am using it now to write her this piece.

Purity - Ethan Gans-Morse

Purity is the first installment of a planned larger oratorio based on a series of mystical writings by my creative partner Tiziana DellaRovere. In the book from which this poetry derives, called Adorata, there are 16 "Virtues." Each of these Virtues represents an aspect of the Divine Feminine, and collectively the 16 Virtues describe a path to transforming the more patriarchal, hierarchal, and guilt-ridden aspects of the Abrahamic religions into a spirituality centered on egalitarianism, inclusivity, and nonjudgmental love for self and others. The piece is structured as a dialogue between a supplicant (the chorus) and Divine Mother (the soloist). The chorus struggles to understand themselves as unconditionally worthy without the usual comparisons and feelings of superiority and inferiority in relation to others.

With respect to the sign/signified theme, this project has been a fruitful dialogue with the concept of "sacred music." In many contexts, certain musical identifiers of "sacred music" have become frozen and inflexible. This project is a chance to work within the "church music" sound while introducing new metaphors of meaning and new interpretations of the tropes of traditional sacred music. Note: Out of respect for the time constraints of the exploratorio, I only set the first half of the poem. Here's the text in full:

PURITY Poetry by Tiziana DellaRovere

Beloved Mother, You are always in my heart.
You dwell in the deepest spaces within me,
Where the Golden Sun, radiance of my being,
Pulsates the infinite love of the Source.
You are pure, Beloved child.
You were born pure and remain pure,

Forever and ever.
Your essence is pure,
Forever and ever.
You are made of Me,
And I dwell in you,
Forever and ever.
In the Holiest of the Holy,
My purity is eternally blossoming in Your hands,
A sweet-scented lily,
Undisturbed by my errors,
Protected from the ignorant actions of others.
No punishments, no rewards, only love.
No struggle, no strife, only love.
No competition, no envy,
No winning or losing,
Only love, only love, only love.
Without punishment, without rewards,
Do I deserve to be loved?
Without struggle or strife,
Do I deserve to be loved?
Without winning or losing
Do I deserve to be loved?
You are loved simply because you exist.
Return your child to Me.
I will remother the little one
And restore your faith in your Purity.
Help me to see myself through Your eyes
To feel the world through Your immaculate heart.

Your Self is as vast as the firmament.
Your Self is silent like the night.
Your Self is brilliant like the sun
Your Self is eternal like God.
Unveil to me the purity of my heart
and reveal the mystery of Your love.
Your Self is a spring of creative love,
discovering the joy of being and becoming.
You are good, you are untouched, you are pure.
May I never separate myself from Your love.
Embrace your purity with Me
in the silence of your prayers,
and let Me love you.
In the silence of the Holiest of the Holy,
In the stillness of my heart,
In the sacred chambers of my soul,
I receive Your love.
Amen.