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## Jonathan Green

Charlie Schlenker  
*WGLT Radio*

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Jonathan Green: The program comprises three song cycles that have been written over the course of the past three years. I thought in an academic setting, it would be interesting for the students in particular, but the audience to see the way in which a composer in a fairly finite amount of time in a career addresses texts by three very different poets and sort of compare and contrast the ways in which the language that is being set to music ends up actually having a significant impact in the way that the music comes out.

Charlie Schlenker: How do you transition from one hat that you wear as the Chief Academic Officer at Illinois Wesleyan University and the political and business and curricular and committee and human resources kinds of functions that that entails and this very creative exercise of your musical discipline?

Green: Well I think that they're surprisingly similar to each other in some ways because in both cases it's a matter of amicable problem solving. I think that the creative process of composing uses a lot of the skills and techniques that administration does. You're trying to integrate complicated and opposing sometimes items in a way that ends up making some logical sense and using the dynamic tension in productive ways.

Schlenker: There are three works on the song cycle. *Devil's Dictionary* by Ambrose Bierce where he has cynical and humorous– bitingly humorous definitions from of words from A to Z, “Blind Love”, a setting of poetry by Michelangelo, and then a Walt Whitman setting, “When a Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd”. What ties these things together?

Green: Well in this case, I guess I'm the one that ties them together. But in each case when I'm looking for texts, in certain cases I try to think of the context of the concert for which a piece may be commissioned or for the nature of a particular performer and the skills that they have that they want to be able to exploit, and in this case, this is a concert featuring three singers and the songs have been written specifically for each of those performers.

Schlenker: The Devil's Dictionary portion involves an unusual arrangement: mezzo-soprano, trombone, percussion, and piano. The trombone is the odd person out, how did that happen?

Green: The trombone is just married to the singer. That piece was commissioned for a concert at Carnegie Hall a couple of years ago and the request for that piece came with that ensemble in it, but there were premiers of two works for that combination that evening and it's actually surprisingly effective. I tried to use the trombone as sort of a male voice that in many cases was in dialogue. Knowing that it was a husband and wife duo, it was kind of fun to play with the nature of the given take in those lines.

Schlenker: So there are marital spats going on?

Green: Actually most of the time there were sort of more humorous barbs rather than spats.

Schlenker: The “Amore Cieco”, the Blind Love premiered last year at Illinois State University and tenor Justin Vickers will be again performing. Let’s listen to a little bit and tell us what’s going on there (music plays).

Green: Well this is a set of three poems by Michelangelo. Michelangelo was actually one of the great poets in his era, but rather than publishing a lot of his poetry during his lifetime, he would write poems on the back of paintings and on the margins of sketchbooks and many of these have been collected and celebrated by a number of composers in successive generations, Benjamin Britten being the most famous of those. These three particular poems are all focused on aspects of melancholy that Michelangelo felt and sort of comparing what he believed was his ugliness against the beauty of the people whom he loved and also the struggles of having a failing eyesight and having that beauty being taken away from him. And so there’s this dynamic unrequited love aspect of his vision, as well as the tensions that he felt towards the people to whom he was attracted.

Schlenker: Why this text?

Green: I thought that the idea of a person whose life is built around a visual world confronting aspects of straining to be able to see or straining to see the things that they wanted was an interesting dynamic tension and thought that these three poems addressing that topic from sort of different perspectives provided a lot of opportunity to play with the shape of the phrase and to sort of juxtapose different views from a common theme.

Schlenker: Isn’t that anxiety about having the sufficiency to create the goal, the art, common to artistic pursuits though whether it’s poetry, writing, or music?

Green: In many ways, that’s just the human experience. I mean, there’s always that reaching for the thing that’s not quite attainable. The best and worst things that we do is when we reach the farthest for that and seeing a person of the stature and really just blistering talent that Michelangelo possessed still having the frustrations and feelings of his own limitations that all of us feel is humbling, but also reassuring (music plays).

Schlenker: Whitman’s “When a Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom’d” is an elegy to Abraham Lincoln written during his railroad funeral procession following his assassination. What drew you to that?

Green: Well I’ve been thinking about something to do with that text for a number of years and obviously the sesquicentennial of Lincoln’s passing and the events that have transpired over the past year related to that and sort of rekindled an interest in looking at those poems. And so I started playing around with them, it’s one of the greatest American poems. It’s sixteen sections that are tied together with all sorts of recurring themes, lines and phrases that created a really complex structure over the course of a long sustained poem. So from a sort of architectural standpoint, in terms of trying to put together a song cycle that has some sense of unity over the

course of ultimately sixteen songs of varying lengths, that collection of poems really provides some bridge opportunity to do something that has lots of little pieces but has really a whole lot.

Schlenker: Is there a more personal reason for choosing Whitman, other than the Lincoln sesquicentennial?

Green: Well, yes. I lost my father about three years ago and certainly there was a— I had a desire of providing a musical memorial to him and Whitman in these poems as he talks about Lincoln refers to him as the great father, the American patriarch, yet in a very personal and I think touching way. This provided me with a good venue to try to put together a piece that I think my father would appreciate as a personal memorial to him.

Schlenker: You mentioned Benjamin Britten as having taken a swing at one of the textual pieces that you've done. You are an American composer, where do you place yourself in terms of who has inflected what you tried to do, is it Ives, is it Chadwick, is it Britten, who trips your trigger and helped form you?

Green: I think everything we listen to certainly contributes to what we do. The one critical view that most satisfied me was a number of years ago in a choir and orchestra piece. A reviewer in the newspaper said that I sounded to him like a "grandson of Charles Ives", which in terms of my lineage and training isn't true but certainly I was pleased to hear the context of those references. But, you know, I also grew up on The Beatles and Led Zeppelin, Elton John, as well as, Mozart and Beethoven, so I think that you're not going to hear any clear popular music references in most of these pieces, although the Bierce has a number of sort of turn-of-the-century winks in it, but it all ends up creating sort of the material that we work with.

Schlenker: Jonathan Green is the Provost of Illinois Wesleyan University and the composer whose works are getting featured in this next concert Tuesday night (music plays). Thanks so much for joining us.

Green: Thank you, Charlie.

Schlenker: I'm Charlie Schlenker.