

Stephen Jaffe - **FORT JUNIPER SONGS** for Soprano, Mezzo-soprano, and Piano
Program Essay by the composer
Created for the premiere (1989) [Complete text follows]

The American poet Robert Francis lived most of his life in and around the town of Amherst, Massachusetts in relative solitude, earning his living from poetry and an occasional newspaper column or violin lesson, and living "not ungenerously" by growing much of his own food, providing for himself as cook, seamster, and handy-man. Unlike other poets who have only metaphorically built the worlds in which they live and work, Francis literally did build the home in which he lived for the last forty years of his life. This modest house he called Fort Juniper (hence the title of my song cycle). It was here that the poet, who died in 1986, produced his most important works, including seven books of poetry and four books of prose (including the memoir Frost: A Time To Talk, and an autobiography, The Trouble With Francis).

In addition to its clever and finely honed language and its universal themes--for which he gained belated acclaim-- Francis' poetry is interesting for its sonic and metric playfulness--he delights in words and wordplay--and for a use of irony remarkable for its light, but often trenchant tone. At first lightly, then assuming a heavier, but never heavy tone, the poems I have chosen trace a progression from the comic to the tragicomic, and part way back again.

The first two poems I chose, O World Of Toms and The Pope are fun--roguish and characteristic wordplay--nothing more or less profound. With Diver, the third in my set, a transition towards a heavier sort of lightness begins. Irony is absent here, but wordplay remains, gaining poetic intensity through a beautifully transparent symmetry. As often in his many other poems about athletes, swimmers and the like, here the poet gives us an image which is transformed into a metaphor about art (or the artistic process).

Following the brief and impish Gloria, invented with a mere handful of syllables (Bach, praise, our Father, etc.), irony takes on a more stinging and poignant tone in two anti-war poems, Blood Stains and Light Casualties. In Blood Stains, Francis' poetic technique of the fragmented surface illuminates a series of striking and recurrent images, suggesting at once the frenzied panic of political figures and the true record of history--indelibly recorded, as the poet leaves to metaphor, by actual deeds rather than press releases. Light Casualties, with its understated and haunting irony, reminds us of another Amherst poet--Emily Dickinson--in the gentlest way it deconstructs another euphemism of war and media: the "light casualties" suffered by troops in Viet Nam. How typical of Francis to render this so impersonally and yet so personally haunting, so lightly and so gravely.

In closing my Francis cycle with Waxwings, I hoped to provide a connection in tone with the playful poems opening the set, in which the simple delight of wordplay is indulged, and the hauntingly light verses which precede it. Of all his poetry perhaps it is Waxwings which most eloquently expresses the poet's thoughts about his own life and about the artistic process. Another poet, Robert Bly, has called it "the most beautiful poem about renunciation in English".

The transparent and artful deception in Francis' best poetry, consists, according to David Graham, "of our surprise that [such] a poem can contain so many interlocking meanings without being difficult in the way Eliot or Pound are difficult." And in his own prose poem, Deception, Francis asks

Wherein lies the deception?

Being simple to read, do they [his poems] seem to have been simple to write? Is this where the deceiving lies?

Or do they only seem simple to read? Are they really not simple at all?

Or are they both truly simple and truly poetry, and is it the possibility of this combination that deceives, or rather undeceives the reader?

According to Graham, Francis is at his best, as in Waxwings, Light Casualties, or His Running My Running. "when his precise and buoyant sense of language can enliven his fundamentally melancholy solitude." In a memorable essay on Francis, Millimeters, Not Miles, Graham concludes

Though in no measurable way, the poems of Francis at his best seem to me to achieve the millimeter of difference between good and great, and whether "major" or "minor" we can ask no more of any poet.

Fort Juniper Songs is the second of my compositions involving the the poetry of Robert Francis. (Along with poetry of Harry Martinson and Denise Levertov settings of the poet's "On That Cool Plane" and " His Running My Running" formed the basis for the middle two songs in Four Songs With Ensemble, for mezzo-soprano, flutes, viola, cello and piano in 1988; a third cycle, for baritone and a consort of low instruments, forms the core of the recent cycle, Pedal Point). In addition to being the home of Robert Francis (and of course Emily Dickinson and Robert Frost), Amherst was also the town in which I grew up. Perhaps the geography of the poet's roots has had something to do with my choosing his poetry, as I keep trying to dig around for my own.

Fort Juniper Songs have been recorded by Terry Rhodes, soprano, Ellen Williams, mezzo-soprano, and the composer, piano on Albany Records (CD Troy 172).

Fort Juniper Songs

for Soprano, Mezzo-soprano, and Piano (1989)

I. O World Of Toms

O world of Toms--tomfools, Tom Peppers,
Dark Peeping Toms and Tom-the-Pipers,
Tom Paines, Tom Joneses, Tom Aquinases,
Undoubting Toms and Doubting Thomases,
Tomboys, Tom Thumbs, Tom-Dick-and Harries,
Tom Collinses and Tom-and-Jerries,
Tom Wolfes, Tom Jeffersons, Tom Hardies,
Tomcods, tomcats, tomtits, tom turkeys--
O hospitable world! And they still come
In every shape and shade of Tom.

2. The Pope

The Pope in Rome
Under St. Peter's dome
Is the Pope at home.

Pomp is his daily fare
Poised in his papal chair
Quite debonair.

The great bell pealing,
The cardinals kneeling,
The soaring ceiling--

All that display
Does not dismay
The Pope a single day.

3. Diver

Diver go down
Down through the green
Introverted dawn
To the dark unseen
To the never day
The under night
Starless and steep
Deep beneath deep
Diver fall
And falling fight
Your weed-dense way
Until you crawl
Until you touch
Weird water land
And stand

Diver come up
Up through the green
Into the light
The sun the seen
But in the clutch
Of your dripping hand
Diver bring
Some uncouth thing
That we could swear
And would have sworn
Was never born
Or could ever be
Anywhere
Blaze on our sight
Make us see.

4. Gloria

Bach praising God the Father we now praise
Who praise no more the Father. We now praise
Our Father Bach, Our praise is for his praise
Of God the Father. Ah, but praising him
Do we not praise with him our Father God?
For praise itself is God and praise the Father.

5. Blood Stains

blood stains how to remove from cotton
silk from all fine fabrics blood stains
where did I read all I remember old stains
harder than fresh old stains often indelible

blood stains what did it say from glass
shattered from metal memorial marble
how to remove a clean soft cloth was it
and plenty of tepid water also from paper

headlines dispatches communiques history
white leaves green leaves from grass growing
or dead from trees from flowers from sky
from standing from running water blood stains

6. Light Casualties

Light things falling--I think of rain,
Sprinkle of rain, a little shower
And later the even lighter snow.

Falling and light--white petal-fall
Apple and pear, and then the leaves.
Nothing is lighter than a falling leaf.

Did the guns whisper when they spoke
That day? Did death tiptoe his business?
And afterwards in another world

Did mourners put on light mourning,
Casual as rain, as snow, as leaves?
Did a few tears fall?

7. Waxwings

Four Tao philosophers as cedar waxwings,
chat on a February berrybush
in sun, and I am one.

Such merriment and such sobriety--
the small wild fruit on the tall stalk--
was this not always my true style?

Above an elegance of snow, beneath
a silk blue sky a brotherhood of four
birds. Can you mistake us?

To sun, to feast, and to converse
and all together--for this I have abandoned
all my other lives.

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