

THE SONGS OF THEODORE CHANLER

ROBERT TANGEMAN

OF all the musical forms our century has inherited from the past the song appears least susceptible to drastic change. The symphonic poem and the long, involved symphony have in general given way to more concise models based upon the eighteenth century; choral and operatic works also and, to a lesser degree, chamber music have undergone re-orientation. But the great traditions of the German *Lied* and of the French song are still alive and very much as they always were.

Composers have not by-passed experimenting with the song – Ives, for instance, and Hindemith, in the early cycle, *Das Marienleben*. (Ives moves towards free, open structures, Hindemith in the opposite direction.) The songs of Theodore Chanler, however, show no inclination to pursue these variations. His statement, which follows, reveals not only a thorough analysis of the problems of song writing, but that for him its traditions enclose principles of permanent value.

"Song writing, being a fusion of diverse elements into a single *form*, may be regarded as a species of counterpoint. The text is the *cantus firmus*, something *given*, that we are not responsible for, and that, like fate, we can bend to our will only if we accept its terms. The text of a song is its premise; and since a poem is complete without the addition of music, it follows that, of all the elements that go into a song, the text is the most self-sufficient. Next, in a descending scale of autonomy, comes the melody. Upon it falls the main burden of achieving selfhood in self-subservience. Its length, its rhythmic design, even its general contour, are all in one way or another conditioned by the text. Yet in spite of this, if it is to deserve the name of melody it must have a recognizable and relatively independent musical shape. It is a kind of offspring of the text, and, like a human offspring, dependent upon its parent while having an individuality of its own. Next in the hierarchy comes the accompaniment, serving to support the usually frail structure of the melody. Woven into the accompaniment may be ornamental and contrapuntal designs of almost any degree of complexity. But its basic structure should again be clear and solid in itself, having as much autonomy as its doubly conditioned status allows.



THEODORE CHANLER
A sketch by
GABRIELLE CHANDLER

"If the text is the parent of the melody, the accompaniment is its nurse. Thus, despite its dependence and frailty – or because of it – the melody draws upon itself the clearest focus of attention.

"The idea of such a hierarchy of course implies no chronological order. In practice, an accompanying figure may be the first thing found, suggesting the beginning of a tune for which appropriate words may be discovered later – last in order of time. But this only bears out the truism that, whereas principles may be fixed, practice is on the contrary something infinitely flexible and subject to no rules.

"It seems to me in any case essential for song writers to keep some sense of this hierarchy in mind, however remote it may at times seem from the sphere of actual practice. To discard it, or consistently override it, leads inevitably to writing songs that are primarily piano pieces (and bad ones at that) with obbligato voice parts."

Chanler, for his *cantus firmi*, favors the small, proportioned lyrics of Blake and Walter De La Mare. Father Leonard Feeney, the Jesuit poet and essayist, has collaborated with Chanler during the past ten years, writing poems expressly for the composer's use.

In one of the earliest songs, *These, My Ophelia*, to a nostalgic, evocative text by MacLeish, the technic is predominantly harmonic, with a solid chordal texture of secondary sevenths and ninths. Not until the *Agnus Dei* (all that remains of a setting of the *Mass* Chanler wrote for women's voices and organ in 1930) do we meet one of the most characteristic features of his later pianistic style, a constant rippling sixteenth-note motion. The music is gentle and delicate, the voices never rising above a piano. One thinks of Fauré, of the placid opening of the *Sanctus* in the *Requiem*, and of such vibrant, animated songs as *Nell*. There are surprising cadential effects, one phrase leads into the next without clear resolution of the tensions created by the dissonant chords.

New elements come into Chanler's style in *The Doves*. Here the piano writing suggests that he has fallen under the spell of Stravinsky the neo-classicist. His approach to the instrument is now percussive. One plays *staccato*, and for the most part with the additional caution, *senza pedale*. There is a bass line of constant vitality, suggesting the *pizzicato* basses of Stravinsky's orchestra. The harmonies have been reduced from the elaborate chromatic structures of *These, My Ophelia* to simple triads. The revised version of this earlier song also shows greater harmonic simplicity and greater clarity and force in the piano writing.

For his first song cycle, *Eight Epitaphs*, Chanler selected the poetry of Walter De La Mare's imaginary gravestone inscriptions. Their delicate and subtle spirit, their urbane humor and sly sophistication called forth matching qualities in him. The perfect miniature appears here for the first time; *Ann Poverty* is a song which requires only thirty-five seconds to make its pathos and tenderness completely convincing.

Un poco più Andante: $\text{♩} = 88$ (senza rigore)

Stranger, here lies Ann Poverty; Such was her name And
 such was she. May Je-soo pi-ty Poverty.

pp
 rit. dolce
 dolce PPP

The complete cycle provides great contrast and variety. One example of the rightness and inevitability of Chanler's settings is the close of the hauntingly beautiful *Alice Rodd*, describing two parents' grief for their departed infant.

Till on our knees God send us ease:
 And now we weep no more than we forget.

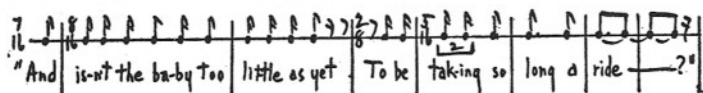
ritenente Tempo 1
 dim. pp sostenuto

The second series, *Three Epitaphs*, is as successful as its longer model. *A Shepherd* brings to mind some Celtic folksong of a pastoral character. *A One-Eyed Tailor* is again a miniature which conveys a complete mood in its five-bar span. *Three Husbands* is sung by a crone who chortles over the demise of her three previous husbands, and evidently looks forward to the departure of her present spouse. Chanler's setting, a masterly bit of ribald music, perfectly evokes the feeling of innocent, merry lunacy.

The fantasy, humor, and gentleness of Chanler's gift come to full flower in the *Peacock Pie* songs, which, like Schumann's *Kinderscenen*, are primarily for adults to perform for children. Each offers its particular delight to a sensitive, youthful mind and ear. Assorted animals are included in the cycle with at least one imaginary creature, *Tillie*, never clearly described, for whom the composer has written an engaging, graceful waltz. The same kind of waltz appears again in *Grandma*, one of a new cycle of *Children's Songs*. This is music for children to sing themselves, just as Schumann's *Jugendalbum* is for child performers. Though the exquisitely wrought piano parts require a skilled executant, the poetry has been set with every regard for young, inexperienced voices. The melodies are fresh and easy to manage from both the tonal and rhythmic viewpoint. Only *Moo is a Cow*, a duet for treble voices, is not a unison setting.

III

Among recent single songs *The Lamb*, a gem of quiet, sincere music, is filled with simplicity and humility. *I Rise When You Enter* is an experiment with jazz, the only excursion into the modern dance hall by this composer. *The Flight*, long and serious, has great power and beauty. Its poem tells, in almost folk-like style, the story of the escape of the Holy Family into Egypt. The interest of this song is focussed on rhythmic fluidity of the vocal line and the constant fluctuation in the accompaniment. Here is one example of Chanler's mastery of verbal accentuation, a portion of Joseph's reply to the Angel's command that he fly with his wife and child.



The concluding strophe reaches a dissonant, dramatic climax before it dies down to the almost seraphic, mystical beauty of the final cadence.

The musical score consists of two systems. The first system shows the vocal line and piano accompaniment. The vocal line has the lyrics "in place of Je sus Our" and "Lord!". The piano accompaniment is marked "piano, quasi organo" and "f dolce". The second system shows the vocal line and piano accompaniment. The vocal line has the lyrics "Lord!". The piano accompaniment is marked "Rit." and "p".

Chanler has developed an integrated, mature style quietly and thoughtfully. He displays complete sincerity and lack of pretentiousness. In him matter and manner reach an organic synthesis more typical of an older culture than of an artistically youthful nation. His songs are the expression of a personality whose strength and tenderness bring wisdom and a new beauty into American music.

THE SONGS OF THEODORE CHANLER

DATE	TITLE	POET	PUBLISHER
1919	Memory - - - - -	William Blake - - -	Manuscript
1919	The Shepherd - - - - -	William Blake - - -	Manuscript
1925	These, My Ophelia (First Version) -	Archibald MacLeish -	Cos Cob Song Volume
1930	Agnus Dei - - - - -	Ordinary of the Mass -	Manuscript
1935	The Doves - - - - -	Leonard Feeny - - -	Manuscript
1936	O Mistress Mine! - - - - -	William Shakespeare -	Manuscript
1937	These, My Ophelia (Revised Version) -	Archibald MacLeish -	Manuscript
1937	Eight Epitaphs - - - - -	Walter De La Mare -	Arrow Music Press
	Alice Rodd		
	Susannah Fry		
	Three Sisters		
	Thomas Logge		
	A Midget		
	No Voice to Scold		
	Ann Poverty		
	Be Very Quiet Now		
1938	Pianissimo - - - - -	Leonard Feeny - - -	Manuscript
1940	Three Epitaphs - - - - -	Walter De La Mare -	Manuscript
	A Shepherd		
	A One-Eyed Tailor		
	Three Husbands		
1940	Four Rhymes from "Peacock Pie" - -	Walter De La Mare -	Manuscript
	The Ship of Rio		
	Old Shellover		
	Cake and Sack		
	Tillie		
1941	The Lamb - - - - -	William Blake - - -	Manuscript
1942	I Rise When You Enter - - - - -	Leonard Feeny - - -	Manuscript
1944	The Flight - - - - -	Leonard Feeny - - -	Manuscript
1945	The Children (Nine Songs for Children's Chorus and Piano) - - - - -	Leonard Feeny - - -	Manuscript
	The Children		
	Once Upon A Time		
	Wind		
	Grandma		
	Sleep		
	Spic and Span		
	The Rose		
	Moo is a Cow		
	One of Us		