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A WINTER'S RAMBLE

Music and lyrics by Eric Sawyer

Salon Series
The Center for Humanistic Inquiry

Wednesday, March 23, 2022
4:30 PM

James Demler, bass-baritone
Eric Sawyer, piano

A Winter's Ramble sets twelve original texts that explore disharmony among the individual, nature, and technology. The cycle adopts the anachronism of the wandering figure of Schubert's *Winterreise* in a modern landscape strewn with technology. As opposed to rejection in love, this figure is set in motion by a sort of breach of trust with nature. About half of the lyrics are 'updates' of the poems by Wilhelm Müller set by Schubert: "The Post" becomes "Notifications"; "The Crow" becomes "The Drone." The resulting irony mirrors that of using the decidedly traditional voice/piano art song to illuminate technology. Whatever humor might result is aimed toward sharpening the medium toward this purpose.

1. Waiting out winter

Waiting out winter,
When days are short and nights are long.
Trusting in seasons
To wake the faith and keep us strong.
But maybe the faith is broken
And now there's little left to say,
And nature has less to give
To help us live
Another day.

Bring me your sorrows,
And I will try to comfort you.
Finding tomorrows
May be beyond our strength to do.
The secret for our safe passage
Out of the darkness into light
Is knowing all along just what was wrong
And what is right.

I stand with frozen stride,
Trying to hide what I don't know;
But now the hour is growing late,
And it's time
To set off across the snow.

2. The Snowmen

Shadowy snowmen, bringing an omen,
Pass by you.
Lit by the starlight, they with the night sight
Spy you.
Caught in the vision, it's your decision
To try to

Learn what they know and see where they go,
And why, too.
Walking together through winter weather,
You're the stranger;
Though it is snowing, suddenly knowing
They're in danger.
Silently calling, their footsteps falling
Older.
Stepping toward summer, searching for somewhere
Colder.

3. Wind Farm

Driven by the wind,
Up on the hillside the turbines spin round,
Caressed by the cold winter air.
Creatures of the sky,
Sending their song toward the hard frozen ground,
They hum a sweet promise of care.

"We'll cover you
And protect you from coming undone
From fierce scorching rays from the sun.
Holding high our wings,
Gathering fruits of the spinning earth's dew,
We return them to you."

Standing down below,
I lift my eyes up their tall metal necks
That ring with the sound of their song,
Wondering how, to the earth holding up my cold
feet,
Songs from the sky, to its hopes of evading defeat
Became pinned, driven by the wind.

4. Cell Towers

I spied from the road a pulsating light.
I followed it up a steep hill.
I passed through deep crags where icicles hung;
The hilltop was glimmering still.

I rose to a ridge and, stung by the wind,
My eyes caught the flickering glow
Of dozens of towers combing the air
And sending their signals below.

They stood their ground in whistling wind
And flashed their connections my way;
But though they held the warmth of the world
To me they had nothing to say.

A silent rush of words tumbled down
And scattered across towards the sea;
And my frozen feet tramped down from the hill
To search for the ones meant for me,
The messages sent and missed,
That one day I might see.

5. Fatigue

Watching, awaiting dawn's light,
I see the town's lights shine bright,
Holding my weary eyes' stare,
Cold, like the crisp winter air.

Pale streaks from the east rip through night's cloak,
Revealing wisps of gray rising smoke.
Lights of the planet grow dim.
Under the rising sun's keep,
My tired eyes close for sleep.

6. Notifications

A trilling shakes my heart awake,
A melody comes piping once and twice
From my device.
Flashing brightly in my hand,
It issues soft command,
Carrying its news to me.
I strain my eyes to see.

Another missive flashes by,
And then one more,
Promise of what this day may have in store,
A caring voice, an open ear
That from these sudden trillings might appear
And find me...

But then in truth, these posts are not for me,
Sent forth in bulk, by those I'll never see,
To whom I can't reply, who cannot hear,
Their faces to me never likely to appear.
And so I ask why I still find
Those gentle sounds
Will give my heart a shake,
Startled awake.

7. Heartland

My memories are my heartland,
And in my heartland stands a tree.
I wander there in daydreams,
Where life is young and I am free.

Sheltered beneath its branches
I linger in its sweet care,
My ear lulled by nature's music
Of oak leaves stirred by the air;

Never a need to hurry,
And never running short of time,
Not yet taught to be lonely
In nature's harmony sublime.

Waking, I grasp the burden;
My heartland calls for my aid
In sickness, an aging mentor
Whose kindness can't be repaid.

I'm striving to remember,
And shield my heartland from the sun.
If I can find my oak tree
Perhaps my cares and dreams are one

8. The Drone

A drone flashed its silver eyes at me.
Its stare seemed to recognize an enemy.
It paused above my upturned eyes;
Its clumps of spinning fingers buzz and hum.

O Drone, have you come to target me,
To pierce my heart and pick my bones summarily?
Or, charged with the task to keep me in your sights,
Are you to follow like a friend, in days to come?

Drone, stay by my side.
Cheer me with your company.
Guide me in my journey;
Record what I have found.
Document my foolish plight
In grainy sight and sound,
Across this frozen ground.

9. The Sports Bar

Bursting in from the frozen night,
I'm surrounded by cheers
As a mighty tournament appears.
"Go! Go!"
The crowd's voice shouts toward the flashing screen.
"Hit them, hit them again!
Show us how it's done, how to be men!
Go! Go!"

Then the crowd draws its collective breath,
Eyes transfixed, holding still as death,
As a great missile's arc
Lands, hitting its mark,
Igniting a spark.
"Yes! Yes!
Such a sight to see, and victory!"

As I avert my eyes
All eyes are on me.
Scenes of triumphant joy
Turn suddenly dim.
Sensing the presence of
Traitors within,
These eyes follow
As into the night
I fly!

10. The Selfie

From my outstretched arm, an image
Looks back at me.
Peering from the dark, its features
Pose awkwardly,
Frozen in a smirk, its eyebrows
Turned gray with frost,
Its surface with scribbled lines embossed.
So tell me:
What bleary subject
And ghoulish artist
Would wreak this sight?
Joined in a portrait,
Do they record--
Does their handiwork convey
The sad fate of a face in blight?

No, it can't be
My own face that I see,
But a blur of bits and pixels
That mock my gaze.
The image here, frosted with ice,
Is of the soul of my device,
Its icy mind ablaze.

11. Midnight Sun

High up in the winter's midnight sky,
A bead of light appears,
Bursting forth from the shadow of the moon.
In a springtime that's come too soon,
The land awakes.

All at once the birds begin to sing,
And a trickle of melting ice becomes a flow,
As spring flowers replace receding snow
And blossom under a sun
That beams its torrid energy across
A startled land.

Waking to a dream, I shield my face
Against the blinding light,
Full of longing to rest in its sweet glow,
Knowing well it can't be so
It's all too fast; it's all too soon.
Bring back the shadow of the moon and I...
I'll stop the world and rest in winter's night.

12. The Emcee

Underneath the highway stands a virtual Emcee.
Perched on metal legs it sends out beats and melody
To a concrete dance floor standing empty in the dark,
Except for one stray dog contributing its howling bark.

Deftly mixing shards of songs of late and times long
gone, Automatically it plays as traffic rushes on.

Hearing music from all times and places inter-sewn,
I think I recognize a fleeting snatch that is my own.

All-knowing Deejay, prince of the night,
Mind of uncanny second sight,
May I stay and listen, hoping whether right or wrong,
I can learn to move my body to your beats and song?

Bass-baritone **James Demler** is known for his versatile range of repertory, spanning the operatic, oratorio, concert, and popular music genres. A perennial favorite with Odyssey Opera, he has sung roles in *Sir John in Love* by Ralph Vaughn Williams, Dvorak's *Dimitrij*, Mario Tedesco-Castelnuovo's *The Importance of Being Earnest*, Donizetti's *L'Assedio di Calais*, Gounod's *Le Medecin Malgre Lui*, and most recently in the U.S. premiere of Pacini's *Maria, Regina D'Inghilterra*. Also, in Boston Mr. Demler has been featured numerous times as a soloist with the Boston Pops, and in 2019 performed all of the speaking roles in Stravinsky's *L'Histoire du Soldat* with The Chameleon Ensemble of Boston. Mr. Demler first gained international attention at Houston Grand Opera, where he appeared as Guglielmo in *Così Fan Tutte* and Peter in *Hansel and Gretel*. He has also made debuts with Palm Beach Opera, Edmonton Opera, and Opera Orchestra of New York, and in 2017 created the role of Sgt. John Regan in Eric Sawyer's *The Scarlet Professor* with Five College Opera. Orchestra appearances include a concert performance of Daron Hagen's *Shining Brow* with the Buffalo Philharmonic, and premieres of songs by Pulitzer Prize winning composer John Luther Adams with the Anchorage Symphony. He made his film debut as Noah in Wes Anderson's *Moonrise Kingdom*, which opened the 2012 Cannes Film Festival.

Eric Sawyer's operas *Our American Cousin*, *The Garden of Martyrs*, and *The Scarlet Professor* have received New England premieres in recent years, the last two with librettos by Harley Erdman. *The Scarlet Professor* received The American Prize for best opera of 2018. A new opera, *The Onion*, is in progress. Sawyer and Erdman's new cabaret musical *My Evil Twin*, starring Jim and John Demler, is scheduled to open in Northampton on May 26. Sawyer's musical vocabulary combines traditions in American music, and he works in genres from popular song to orchestral music. His *Fantasy Concerto: Concord Conversations*, a triple concerto based on the American Transcendentalists, was performed in recently by Boston Modern Orchestra Project and the Claremont Trio. A new orchestral song cycle, *Ways of Being*, was introduced by BMOP in October, and a new horn quintet by Jean Jeffries and the Wistaria String Quartet last month. A recipient of the Joseph Bearn's Prize and an award from the American Academy of Arts and Letters, Mr. Sawyer is on the music faculty of Amherst College. His music is available on the Albany Records and BMOP/sound labels.