

# PHILADELPHIA CHAMBER MUSIC SOCIETY

a life more beautiful

PREVIEW  
NOTES

## *A Song by Mahler*

Jennifer Johnson Cano, *mezzo-soprano*; Ryan Bradford, *baritone*;

David Shifrin, *clarinet*; FLUX Quartet

Wednesday, May 15 – 7:30 PM

*Perelman Theater, Kimmel Center*

### **PROGRAM NOTE**

A celebrated concert singer, famous for a particular Mahler love song, develops early onset Alzheimer's. The drama follows her and her husband, who is also her pianist, as they confront their new reality. The tragic end result resolves in a new, elevated understanding of their love.

#### **Composer note**

*A Song by Mahler* is the third piece I have written in a genre, which I see as a combination of theater and music. I have tried to combine these two forms in a way that addresses some of the problems I find in opera. Particularly, the fact that singing any set of words takes approximately three times as long as speaking them. This leads to a sense of time, which is not how we experience "real time." Another aspect, which I have always found problematic is the setting of purely mundane, everyday words into singing.

In these works, I have written text, to be performed as in a play, while composing music, which, as in an opera, conveys underlying and essential emotional context. In the previous two pieces there was no singing at all. In this one I employ both speech and singing. The speech is rhythmically controlled in order to synchronize with the music. But it is essentially "acted" as in a play. The singing takes over when an emotional threshold is reached where speaking doesn't suffice.

The play itself, considers the situation of a concertizing singer, who is diagnosed with early onset Alzheimer's. She confronts the reality of this, along with her husband, who is also her accompanist. The play is not an attempt at documenting the myriad aspects of the disease. It is, rather, an attempt to address the specific emotional evolution of this couple, their love, and their particular relationship to music.

I have used one Mahler song, "Liebst Du Um Schoenheit," as a vehicle for the story. It is the song she always sang as her last encore in concerts. I place a "Masterclass" early in the piece in order to explain the deep meaning of the song, for her, personally, and in order for our audience to understand it. Her gradual deterioration, and his attempts to adjust, while trying to keep her connected through music, lead to an eventual resolution, and an evolved sense of their love.

— Marc Neikrug