

Cynthia Opera Presents
While There's Light
by Sarah Sarhandi & Vincent Katz

A Conversation with Sextus Propertius & Music from an Opera in Progress

4th August 2021, 7 pm
The Cockpit, Gateforth Street, London

Music: Sarah Sarhandi
Libretto: Vincent Katz
Singers: Loré Lixenberg, mezzo-soprano; Rosie Middleton, mezzo-soprano; Ebe Oke, tenor
Percussion: Mark Sanders
Viola: Sarah Sarhandi
Suit by John Pearse
Sound Technician: Nir Perlman

Program Note

Remember how different the world was in 2011? Think how different it must have been two thousand years ago, or a little more, around the time Propertius was alive and strutting his stuff in the Roman Forum and also in the halls of his patron Maecenas and the emperor Augustus. Different, but also the same. Which is part of the reason, I think, we are drawn to Propertius' poetry, his intensely conflicted and then suddenly soaring phrases responding to the wrenching emotions he felt while in the throes, and then the aftermath, of his love affair with a woman he called Cynthia. He called her Cynthia partially to veil her identity, partially as a nod to her prodigious musical skills (Cynthius was one of the epithets of the god Apollo, born on Mount Kynthos). Sarah and I have been trying to think of ways to work on this project for years, and we have created three arias at this point.

In the first, 'The Roman Callimachus,' we have Propertius singing of his origins ('What class I am and from where') and detailing the pain of land distribution under Augustus ('you allowed my relative's limbs to go abandoned, / you cover the poor man's bones with no earth'). About half way through, he summons his strength and makes his promise to gain fame by singing Rome's praises ('whatever stream should flow from my narrow / breast, all of it will serve my nation'). If we know the whole story, we know this ambition can be achieved only with difficulty. Twice Propertius will rebuff the advances of Maecenas, Augustus' right-hand man and cultural minister, when he comes asking for official poetry to embellish the empire's image. Propertius is a poet of love; he can no more write of war and power than Maecenas can change his own character and come out of the shadows to receive the public recognition that is his due.

Our second aria, 'Lucky me! Radiant night!', is sung by Cynthia, who may or may not have been a courtesan. Certainly, she was a very talented and beautiful woman, who drove Propertius to

paroxysms of delight and also tortured suffering when she could or would not be with him. In the language of the literary genre Propertius wrote in — Latin Love Elegy — Cynthia was the *domina* and Propertius the *miser*. A typical trope is the poet complaining at being locked outside the gate to his lover's home. Most of Propertius' poems are first-person narration in the original text. To make the libretto, I transformed the scenario, putting some of the poems' words in the mouths of other characters. In this aria, for example, Cynthia, not Propertius, sings of a night of very memorable love-making. So memorable, in fact, that the couch that was the site of their love was 'made fertile by my pleasures!' The violent side to their relationship is not skirted here, and yet the aria ends on a quieter, philosophical note: 'But you, while there's light, don't neglect the fruit of life! / If you give all your kisses, you give few.' Sarah's music for this entire aria, and especially the ending, is so evocative; it seems to include all the emotional ups and downs we all have been experiencing in these last few years. It becomes more than the specific story; or maybe, each listener hears their own story in it.

Finally, in the third aria of the evening, 'O guardian of the world,' Apollo, the god of rationality and music, addresses Octavian, soon to be Augustus, before the decisive battle of Actium in 31 BCE, at which Octavian will defeat the forces of Mark Antony and Cleopatra, thus consolidating his imperial power. Apollo says that Augustus is 'more famous than Hector' and exhorts him: 'conquer the sea: the earth is already yours; my bow fights for you / and this whole quiver on my shoulders is on your side.' As our evening ends, we are left with the image of Propertius and Cynthia struggling to maintain their fragile private love in the context of a brutal and excessive outer world.

The music Sarah has composed for these three arias and for two instrumental interludes amazes me. She has a way of thinking about music that corresponds very closely with the way I think about poetry: it has something deeply rooted in tradition (in Sarah's case the traditions of Western Classical Music, contemporary music, and Pakistani music) while also being very free, not bound to previous ways of composing. Her melodies and harmonies, her timbres, are so unique, and yet they feel ancient at the same time.

Vincent Katz
London, July 31, 2021

Libretto

From the poems of Sextus Propertius, translated by Vincent Katz

I. PROPERTIUS — 'The Roman Callimachus'

Propertius explains his origins and goals as a poet to his friend, Tullus.

What class I am and from where, Tullus, who my Penates,
you ask all this in the name of our long friendship, Tullus.

If the Perusine tombs of our country are known to you,
funerals in Italy's hard times,
when Roman discord hunted her citizens —
this was especially painful for me, my Etruscan soil:
you allowed my relative's limbs to go abandoned,
you cover the poor man's bones with no earth —

Wolf of Mars, battlements nurtured on your milk
I'll try to lay down in solemn verse!

God help me, for the sound in my mouth is tender!
Whatever stream can flow from my narrow
breast, all of it will serve my nation.

To me, Bacchus, extend your leaves of ivy,
that Umbria, swelling with my books, be proud,
Umbria, land of the Roman Callimachus!

Whoever sees these citadels ascend from the valleys
will value their walls by my genius!

II. CYNTHIA — 'Lucky me! Radiant night!'

Lucky me! radiant night! and you
couch made fertile by my pleasures!

As many words as we shared while the lamps were on —
once light was removed, that many bouts ensued!
First I wrestle him with naked breasts,
then my concealing tunic brings delay.
I push open his lids, as they slip into sleep,
and say, with my expression, "So, you lie there spent?"
With such varied embrace we exchange positions!
So many of his kisses linger on my lips!

"But if you," he says, "intend to go to bed and keep your clothes on,
you'll feel my hands ripping your clothing:
in fact, if excessive rage provokes me,
you'll be showing your mom your battered arms."
Drooping boobs don't yet preclude my play:
let her worry who knows the shame of having given birth.

While the fates permit us, let us sate our eyes on sex:

a long night is coming for us, daylight never to return.
If only he'd agree that we be bound like this in mid-embrace
by a chain no day would ever loosen!
He is mistaken, who seeks a limit for love's madness:
true lust is incapable of moderation.

But you, while there's light, don't neglect the fruit of life!
If you give all your kisses, you give few.
And just as leaves fall from dried-up garlands,
and you see them floating, strewn over the wine bowls,
it's the same for us, lovers who now breathe vigorously:
perhaps tomorrow shuts in our fate.

III. APOLLO — 'O guardian of the world'

Apollo addresses Octavian (soon to be Augustus) before the battle of Actium.

O guardian of the world from Alba Longa,
Augustus, more famous than Hector and your other ancestors,
conquer the sea: the earth is already yours: my bow fights for you
and this whole quiver on my shoulders is on your side.
Their fleet may row with a hundred wings:
don't let it frighten you. Against its will, that fleet is slipping into the sea:
It is the cause that smashes and exalts powers in a war;
Unless justice is at hand, shame shatters the armor.
The time has come, engage the ships: I, time's author,
will guide the Julian prows with laurel-bearing hand.

Bios

Sarah Sarhandi (composer) — Sarah Sarhandi is a composer and virtuoso violist with joint British and Pakistani heritage based in London. She studied viola at the Royal Academy of Music. Her music weaves together fluid sometimes fragmented melody, viola, voices including her own, sound and electronica. She is particularly interested in and recognised for collaborative work. She has recorded and performed worldwide, written and recorded for film and TV. Recently she has begun to create her own videos as well as initiate projects driven by her music with film and video practitioners. Her most recent performance project Both Universe emerged following a residency in Pakistan in 2015 with the late Aamir Zaki, legendary Pakistani guitarist and was performed as a work in progress at Alchemy Festival Southbank and Kala Sangham Bradford in 2016. Sarhandi recently composed and recorded a score and soundscape for Elizabeth Kwant's artists film 'Am I Not a Woman and a Sister' a four channel

installation that showed between November and February 2019 at the International Museum of Slavery in Liverpool. Other collaborators past and present include Bjork, Jean Charles de Castelbajac, Damien Hirst, Hanif Kureishi, Russell Maliphant, Lore Lixenberg, Paul Benney, Vincent Katz, Shelagh Wakely, Thomasin Gulgec & Estela Merlos, Suhaee Abro, Sophie Molins and Mark Sanders.

Vincent Katz (translator and librettist) — Vincent Katz is well known in the United States and abroad as a poet, critic, editor, and curator, as well as translator. He is the author of fourteen books of poetry, including *Broadway for Paul* (2020, Alfred A. Knopf), *Southness* (2016, Lunar Chandelier Press), *Swimming Home*, (2015, Nightboat Books), *Rapid Departures* (2005, Ateliê Editorial), *Understanding Objects* (2000, Hard Press), *Pearl* (1998, powerHouse Books) and *Cabal of Zealots* (1988, Hanuman Books). He won the 2005 National Translation Award, given by the American Literary Translators Association, for his book of translations from Latin, *The Complete Elegies of Sextus Propertius* (2004, Princeton University Press). He was awarded a Rome Prize Fellowship in Literature at the American Academy in Rome for 2001-2002. Katz has taught at the Yale University School of Art (New Haven), in the Art Writing MFA program at the School of Visual Arts (New York), the Summer Writing Program at Naropa University (Boulder, Colorado), the University of Campinas (Brazil), and The Poetry Project (New York). He lives in New York City where he curated the Readings in Contemporary Poetry series at Dia Art Foundation from 2010 to 2021.

Loré Lixenberg (mezzo-soprano, Apollo) — Loré Lixenberg has performed with experimental visual and sound artists STELARC, Bruce Mclean, ORLAN, Georgina Starr, Imogen Sidworthy and David Toop. As a performer of her own works, she has a compositional practice based purely on voice, in pieces such as 'Singterviews' (PANIC ROOM) that was performed at The Armory, New York, among other locales. She has published the artist book *Memory Maps*, the monographic CD, *The Afternoon of a Phone*, and the opera *Singlr* that takes the form of an app, to be premiered at the Tête-à-Tête Opera Festival 2021 in London. Her vinyl release, *Nancarrow Karaoke*, a record of Conlon Nancarrow piano rolls she transcribed for her own voice multi-tracked, has just been released on the Dutch De Player label.

Rosie Middleton (mezzo-soprano, Cynthia) — Rosie Middleton specialises in new music. In 2019 Rosie was artist-in-residence at Snape Maltings and The Banff Centre, where she collaborated with composers on *voice(less)* — a series for voice and electronics. Rosie has performed in the contemporary opera works *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (Royal Opera House) and *#echochamber* (Aequitas, Reykjavik/UK Tour). Highlights of 2020-21 include Laura Bowler's *Gold* with Riot Ensemble, a Somerset House Residency with Catherine Kontz on *12 Hours*, winning the Michiko Hirayama scholarship for excellence in experimental vocal music, and Jamie Hamilton's *Versionland* with Phaedra Ensemble.

Ebe Oke (tenor, Propertius) — Ebe Oke is a composer and multimedia artist, who studied composition with Karlheinz Stockhausen. Their album SPECIES, which examines themes of identity, gender, healing and the non-human, uses bird and insect sounds which are processed as instrumentation alongside non-linear percussion, programming, string quartet and Oke's

voice pluralised through treatments to embody the multiple avatars. Among Oke's other works is FIELD, commissioned by the artist AA Bronson, a founder of the artist collective General Idea. FIELD has been presented at Art Basel in Switzerland, Austria's Salzburger Kunstverein, and the KW Institute of Contemporary Art in Berlin. DOKUMENT #2 is a collaborative live record Oke did with Laurie Anderson and Brian Eno.

Mark Sanders (percussion) — Mark Sanders' career takes in many styles and genres. This history informs his now mainly free-improvisation-based work, but he also works in theatre, dance, contemporary classical and conceptual art situations. He has worked with many world renowned musicians, such as Evan Parker, Jah Wobble, Wadada Leo Smith and is a member of working groups with Nicole Mitchell, Elaine Mitchener, John Butcher, John Edwards, Elliott Sharp and Pat Thomas. He has his own groups 'StaggerLee Wonders,' which uses Black Radical Poetry and Prose, and the electronica-based group CollapseUncollapse. Mark is a lecturer at Leeds Conservatoire and visiting lecturer at Birmingham Conservatoire and The Royal Academy of Music.

Sextus Propertius — What is known of the Roman poet Sextus Propertius comes from the poems he published in four books during the second half of the 1st century BCE. In the last poem of his first book, published in Rome around 30 BCE, Propertius, who narrates most of his poems in the first person, seemingly more transparently himself than poets who wrote in other genres, refers to "the Perusine tombs of our country" and "funerals in Italy's hard times, / when Roman discord hunted her citizens." He specifies his home territory, writing, "Umbria, below Perugia on the plain, / bore me, fertile Umbria, productive land." We can visit that precise spot today, on the plain below the town now known as Perugia.

Apparently, his family's property was confiscated. Perugia was besieged by Octavian (later to be Augustus) in 41 BCE. The city was plundered and the surrounding area subject to land redistribution. In the first poem of Propertius' fourth and final book, published approximately 16 BCE, Propertius writes that he had to gather the bones of his father, presumably killed in the civil wars. Propertius himself was "forced into modest quarters... / the dull measuring rod took away refinements of wealth."

How he got to Rome we don't know. Perhaps he had the opportunity to join the educated classes by studying law or some other profession open to a man of letters. What is certain is he became educated in Greek and Roman literature and became a proficient poet in his own right. His first book was probably published when he was around 20 years of age. Perhaps because of that first book, known in antiquity as the *monobiblos*, the single book, Propertius came to the attention of Gaius Maecenas, a close adviser of Octavian's, and later a kind of cultural minister when Octavian took power after the battle of Actium in 31 BCE and then became the Emperor Augustus in 27 BCE.

Propertius was asked by Maecenas to write official verse in favor the Empire, as the most famous poets of the land, Vergil and Horace, also patronized by Maecenas and within the inner circle of the emperor, had been doing. In two poems, Propertius refuses Maecenas' requests,

arguing rhetorically that, if he could, he would certainly celebrate the great victories of Augustus, and Maecenas' role in them, but he, Propertius is not an epic poet. Rather, he is like the Hellenistic poet Callimachus. "Callimachus," he writes, "with narrow chest, does not thunder out / the Phelgraeon uproars of Jove and Enceladus, / nor is my diaphragm fit to set in hard verse / the story of Caesar back to his Phrygian forebears." Everyone is suited to a certain task, and Propertius is suited to love and love poetry. Using another rhetorical device, he likens his love affairs to war: "Writhing against one another on a narrow bed's our battle: / as far as each is able, let him, in that art, waste the day."

Most of Propertius' poems involve his relationship with a woman he calls Cynthia, probably a reference to the god Apollo, born on Mount Kynthos, on the island of Delos, as Cynthia is skilled in the arts of poetry and music. Many poems describe — in vivid terms, alternately highly erudite, with obscure mythological references, and brashly direct, a kind of street language — the tempestuous ups and downs of their relationship. In his final book, Propertius attempts some of the arcane, learned topics that were expected of a poet of his stature. In the seventh poem of his fourth book, Cynthia's ghost comes to visit him. They fight again, realizing that the passion they shared during life will survive their time on earth.

Thanks

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