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Misery Island

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BOSTON UNIVERSITY
COLLEGE OF FINE ARTS

Thesis

MISERY ISLAND

by

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B.S., Northeastern University, 2009

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Music 2013
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MISERY ISLAND
SAMUEL ROBERTS BEEBE

ABSTRACT

Misery Island is a monologue for high soprano and string quartet. The libretto, written by Nerissa Cooney, includes original verse as well as fragments from Henry David Thoreau's Walden. Collaboration during the production of the libretto offered an opportunity to plan the emphasis and phrasing of the text; in particular, via our voices, we could each express our own "reading" of the text to each other. This process often revealed dynamics and stresses embedded in the text. Being able to volley ideas and rewrite the text established many themes that would be explored as music later on.

I refer to the five movements in the piece as a monologue because it is intended as a single dramatic statement. The libretto offered a bounty of opportunities to compose music with the intention of adding a particular perspective to a given text. I specifically tried to keep the performance in mind while composing, attempting to support the vocalist dramatically with the quartet material; in general, I tried to make a piece in which the text and the music are mutually supportive. In a sense, a major goal of mine was to let the text drive the music to places it would otherwise not have gone. The challenge of experimenting with new ideas in composition while striving to best represent a desired dramatic effect or scenario has proved itself to be a fruitful way of finding fresh material with purpose and character.

Misery Island was premiered at the Boston University Concert Hall on April 8, 2013, with Katrina Galka singing, Nelli Jabotinsky and Hyunj Kim on violin, Evan Perry on viola, Robert Mayes on violoncello, and the composer conducting.
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1. You went to the woods

*You went to the woods*

*Because you wished to live deliberately,*

*To front only the essential facts of life,*

*To see if you could not learn what it had to teach...* \(^1\)

2. In the year Sixteen-Twenty

In the year Sixteen-Twenty,

Shipbuilder Robert Moulton sailed out to the island to cut timber

And was stranded for three days

During a ferocious winter storm.

It is from this that the island takes its name.

Five miles from land,

Eighty-three acres,

And groves of aspen,

Open meadows,

And rugged rocky shores.

There are two miles of overgrown trails

That lead to stony beaches

And wind by the ruins of a summer hotel,

Lost in the fire

That took the lives of lavish sunbathers.

\(^1\) *Italics* indicate excerpts from *Walden*, by Henry David Thoreau. All remaining text composed by Nerissa Cooney.
3. Walk from one empty shore to the other

Walk from one empty shore to the other
Just to see that it’s there.
Take a stone, skip it,
Watch it sink.
Take another stone,
Put it in your pocket for keeps.
Lay down and fall asleep.
Wake up filled with heat,
Run back and forth in receding waves.
The day is long –
Like it could go on forever.
But morning passed into the stillness of mid-day sun.

*Live deep and suck out all the marrow of life.*

*Rout all that is not life,*
And make something new.

4. Once it was full of busy pleasures

Once it was full of busy pleasures,
Afternoons that went on forever.
Ladies and gentlemen,
In the full of summer’s swing.
Laughter, excess, and revelry,
Salty spray on sun kissed skin,
They basked in day dreams,
Spinning like threads of fate –
Cut down by the swift hand of Atropos in a fiery blaze.
Look at it now,
A few remaining stones
That could never have known
That they would be all that is left.
5. Sit till the sun slips below

Sit till the sun slips below
And makes you shudder.
A moonless night leaves cold hands and loneliness.
Go as far as you can.
See how much more there is?
What else could there be?
What will be left?
And when years have gone by,
Will it make any difference
That this is how the story went?
You went to the woods to live deliberately,
And not, when you come to die,
Discover that you had not lived.
1. You went to the woods

You went to the woods.
You went to the woods.

You wished to live.
You wished to live.

You wished to live.
You wished to live.

You wished to live.
You wished to live.

You wished to live.
You wished to live.

You wished to live.
You wished to live.

You wished to live.
You wished to live.

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You wished to live.
You wished to live.

You wished to live.
You wished to live.

You wished to live.
You wished to live.
2. In the year Sixteen-Twenty

S  Andante (\( \frac{3}{2} \) \( \times \) 92)

Vln. 1  Andante (\( \frac{3}{2} \) \( \times \) 92)

Vln. 2

Vlc.
3. Walk from one empty shore to the other

Smoothly, fluidly \( \{q = 120\} \)

Smoothly, fluidly \( \{q = 120\} \)

Smoothly, fluidly \( \{q = 120\} \)

Smoothly, fluidly \( \{q = 120\} \)

Smoothly, fluidly \( \{q = 120\} \)

Just to see that there.

Walk from one empty

shore

to the other.

from one empty sy
A little slower \( \frac{\text{\{} q = 104 \text{\}} } \)

A little slower \( \frac{\text{\{} q = 104 \text{\}} } \)

Tempo primo \( \frac{\text{\{} q = 120 \text{\}} } \)

Tempo primo \( \frac{\text{\{} q = 120 \text{\}} } \)

Watch a task.

Put it in your pocket for.
Live, deep and suck out all the essence of life.

 poco accel.

 And

 Adagio (q = 66)

 make some thing new.
4. Once it was full of busy pleasures

Once it was full of busy pleasures
A little slower, broadly (q = 76)

A little slower, broadly (q = 76)

A little slower, broadly (q = 76)

A little slower, broadly (q = 76)
That they would be all that's left.

5. Sit till the sun slips below
Go as far

\begin{align*}
\text{S:} & \quad \text{Slower} (q = 60) \\
\text{Vln. 1:} & \quad \text{Slower} (q = 60)
\end{align*}
Vln. 1
Vln. 2
Vla.
Vlc.

S

Vln. 1
Vln. 2
Vla.
Vlc.

S

S

Vln. 1
Vln. 2
Vla.
Vlc.

Vln. 1
Vln. 2
Vla.
Vlc.

Largo \( \mathcal{q} = 44 \)

S

Vln. 1
Vln. 2
Vla.
Vlc.

Largo \( \mathcal{q} = 44 \)

S

Vln. 1
Vln. 2
Vla.
Vlc.

Vln. 1
Vln. 2
Vla.
Vlc.

Vln. 1
Vln. 2
Vla.
Vlc.

Vln. 1
Vln. 2
Vla.
Vlc.

Vln. 1
Vln. 2
Vla.
Vlc.

Vln. 1
Vln. 2
Vla.
Vlc.

Vln. 1
Vln. 2
Vla.
Vlc.

Vln. 1
Vln. 2
Vla.
Vlc.

Vln. 1
Vln. 2
Vla.
Vlc.
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Education
- Boston University, May 2013, Summa Cum Laude
  o MM in Composition
  o Composition Instructors: Samuel Headrick, Rodney Lister, Ketty Nez,

- Northeastern University, graduated April 2009, Magna Cum Laude
  o BS in Music Technology
  o Composition Instructors: Howard Frazin, Ronald Bruce Smith, Mike Frengel, Anthony de Ritis

- Marblehead High School, graduated June 2004

Awards
- 2013 Wainwright Prize, Boston University Composition/Theory Deptartment

- 2009 Northeastern University Award of Excellence in Music Technology

Teaching and Work Experience
- Musicianship Instructor, Suzuki School of Newton, Sept. 2013 – present
  o Ear training, sight-singing, dictation, ages 5-12

- Digital Music Instructor, Brooks School Summer Program, June 2012 - present
  o Electronic Composition, Sound Design, Scoring for Video, ages 7-14

- Musicianship Instructor, Boston University, Sept. 2011 – May 2013
  o Ear training, sight-singing, dictation, keyboard harmony, undergraduate level

- Freelance Recording Engineer, Sept. 2008 - present
  o A Far Cry, The Mount Auburn Quartet, Composers in Red Sneakers, WordSong, and When Notes Fly

Performance Experience
- Boston University Symphonic Chorus Member, tenor, Sept. 2011 – May 2013
  o Ann Howard Jones, Music Director

- Freelance composer/conductor/vocalist, 2004 - present

  o Joshua Jacobson, Music Director