

## Juliana Hall: A Remarkable Art Song Composer

KATHERINE EBERLE

When I recall the many art songs I have studied, performed, and taught in the past twenty years, only a few cycles stand out as ones I find worthy of recording or performing repeatedly. I believe high quality art songs require captivating melodies, interesting rhythms, excellent text setting, and harmonic choices that accompany the text so that the words really speak to me emotionally. With those criteria fulfilled, I believe I can reach my audiences most effectively. Juliana Hall's compositions meet those requirements for me.

I first encountered Juliana Hall's works in the 1990's when a colleague heard I was seeking repertoire for a compact disc recording and suggested I contact the graduate dean at my university, as his daughter-in-law was a composer. I did, and Hall generously sent me copies of some of her music, which I then went on to perform and record. A few years later she invited me to perform her cycle *Letters from Edna* at Yale. She is a fabulous collaborative pianist as well, so the experience was a very pleasant one for us both. Years went by and we lost track of one another. When it came time for me to record another compact disc, I remembered that my favorite work of the past twenty years was Hall's *Letters from Edna*. When I contacted her again and told her I wished to record the songs and use them as part of my concert tour, she agreed to also let me interview her so that I could write articles about her during my sabbatical.

If you are unfamiliar with Juliana Hall, let me introduce you. She is a prolific composer of classical art songs having written more than 250 individual songs. Born in 1958 and currently living in Connecticut with her husband and son, Hall composes full time and has been a visiting guest professor at the nearby Hartt School of Music. Hall's music has been performed in more than two dozen countries in North and South America, Europe, Asia, and Australia by more than 100 performers.

She was awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship in Music Composition in 1989, at the tender age of 30. She applied for the fellowship so that she could dedicate herself to composing full-time. The award offered her living expenses for a year, and as a result she wrote six major works including *Lore-*

*lei* (a setting for mezzo, horn and piano on a poem by Sylvia Plath) recorded on the Vienna Modern Masters label (VMM2005); *Theme In Yellow* (seven songs for soprano or tenor and piano on poems by Robert Frost, Amy Lowell, Edna St. Vincent Millay, and Carl Sandburg), excerpts of which I also recorded on the same label. That year Hall wrote *Peacock Pie* (twenty songs for tenor and piano on poems by Walter de la Mare); *Songs of Enchantment* (ten songs for soprano and piano on poems by Walter de la Mare); *Syllables of Velvet, Sentences of Plush* (seven songs for soprano and piano on letters of Emily Dickinson) published by Boosey and Hawkes (VAB313); and

*Winter Windows* (seven songs for baritone and piano on poems by Walter de la Mare, Robert Frost, Edna St. Vincent Millay, and Percy Bysshe Shelley).

Hall has received a number of commissions. Two were from the Schubert Club of St. Paul, Minnesota for distinguished Metropolitan Opera singers David Malis and Dawn Upshaw, one from the Mirror Visions Ensemble was premiered at The American Church in Paris, France; one from the Turnpike Camerata of New Jersey was premiered in New York City; and one from soprano Elizabeth Dubberly was premiered in Montevideo, Uruguay.

Last fall, I began studying Hall's three

### To Harriet Monroe

Dance-like ♩ = 160

Mezzo-soprano

Piano

6 *mf* *mp*

M-S. Spring is here, and I

Pno. *mp*

11 *mp*

M-S. could be very happy, except that I

Pno. *mf* *mp*

18 *p* *mf* *rit.* *Tempo I, ♩ = 160*

M-S. am broke. Would you mind paying me now in-

Pno. *mf*

Juliana Hall, "To Harriet Monroe," from *Letters from Edna*

song cycles for mezzo-soprano so that I could make some comparisons for lectures at the Athena Festival and the University of Hartford Women Composers Festival, as well as potential publications. Hall's own words about her writing reveal her compositional style quite clearly. Below are excerpts from an email on September 13, and my telephone interview with her on September 14, 2012.

**KE:** What led you to pursue composing?

**JH:** Although I began my musical life as a pianist, first studying with my mother, I always had a feeling that I might be able to write music...I'm not even sure why. However, when I did compose pieces and my music was heard by composition teach-

ers at various junctures in my life, those teachers always encouraged me to abandon piano (or at least make it secondary) and concentrate on developing my compositional ability.

**KE:** Why specialize in art song?

**JH:** As some of my earliest pieces were songs, I very early discovered that I enjoyed working with text and felt that song composition was "right" for me...and it seemed, too, that I had something of a knack for it. Perhaps this was because I had always been drawn to literature and had enjoyed both English and drama in school.

**KE:** What past teachers or critics shaped your compositional style?

**JH:** As far as teachers, I have been blessed by the opportunity to study with

quite a few wonderful teachers. One of the most influential comments that continues to guide me came from Frederic Rzewski, who insisted that I not seek to follow any particular fad or trend, but that I find my own inner voice and trust my own compositional intuition. Martin Bresnick and Leon Kirchner were very helpful with myriad technical details, which was especially important in my case, since I really began my formal composition studies relatively late in life while in graduate school at Yale. Later, when I was studying in Minneapolis, Dominick Argento helped me quite a bit with his vast knowledge of literature and by sharing his deep experience of writing for the special qualities of the different voice types. He also helped me to "find my own voice" by convincing me of the importance of setting English-language texts as a native English speaker.

**KE:** How would you characterize your songs?

**JH:** I would characterize my songs as lyrical works written in an extended tonality that sounds modern without giving the impression of belonging to a school of composition (atonal, romantic, etc.). One other characteristic that audiences frequently comment upon is that they are able to understand virtually every single word in my works—without reading printed texts—which I believe is due to the manner in which I set the rhythms according to the text, down to the level of individual syllables.

**KE:** Do you write for one specific singer or voice type?

**JH:** I have written mostly song cycles for soprano and baritone voices, because the majority of performers I've known have been either sopranos or baritones. However, I've also written three mezzo cycles, three tenor cycles, and a cycle for bass.

**KE:** What do you believe sets your songs apart from other composers?

**JH:** Although I am perhaps better acquainted with song composers of past generations than those closer to my own age, I think what makes my songs unique is that when I am composing I am not attempting to "comment upon" or "express my view of" the chosen text; rather, I am trying to set each poem or letter in a manner designed to illuminate the poet's or writer's point of view as I feel it to be. One concrete example of how I might do this is to very closely set my melodies to the rhythm of

26  $\text{♩} = 92$ , Expressive 17  
M.S. *p*  
stead of on pub-li-ca-tion of those so stun-ning ver-ses of mine which you have?  
Pno. *p*

32  $\text{♩} = 160$   
M.S. *mp* *rit.* *p*  $\text{♩} = 160$  *mf*  
I am be - come ve - ry, ve - ry thin, and have ta-ken to smok-ing Vir -  
Pno. *mp* *p* *mp* *mf*

39  $\text{♩} = 104$   
M.S. *mf* *f* *ff*  
gin-ia to - bac-co P. S. I am aw - ful - ly  
Pno. *p* *f* *ff*

46 *mp*  
M.S. *mp*  
broke. Would you mind pay - ing me a - lot?  
Pno. *mp*

each individual word in the text, in a sense letting the text dictate how the music will go; this is very different from a composer like Schubert, who might “fit” a text into a repetitive rhythmic structure of his own devising.

**KE:** Who are some of your favorite poets?

**JH:** In my early days as a composer I very much liked setting poems by Paul Verlaine (in French), Rainer Maria Rilke (in German), and Federico Garcia Lorca (in Spanish). For

some time now I have concentrated on setting English-language poems. I do seem to be drawn to a certain type of lyrical poetry that lends itself very well to musical setting. Elizabeth



Juliana Hall,  
photo by Paul Cryan

Bishop, Amy Lowell, and Edna St. Vincent Millay are three poets from my “collection” of poets, that is, poets I tend to enjoy working with repeatedly. These three are women, and I do feel that women poets have a certain feeling that male poets do not have; however, I also have a number of male poets whose works I enjoy. Also, I find it stimulating to work with both the more masculine tone of male poets as well as the female sensibility with which certain women poets express themselves. I believe it is more of a coincidence that my three cycles for mezzo-soprano use women’s texts; many of my works set texts by poets such as

W.H. Auden, William Blake, Lewis Carroll, e.e. cummings, Walter de la Mare, Thomas Hardy, Edward Lear, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, Robert Frost, Carl Sandburg, and William Shakespeare (among others). Of course, other women whose poetry I enjoy setting include Emily Bronte, Emily Dickinson, Marianne Moore, and Sylvia Plath, but my choice is always governed more by how an individual text fits into my plan for exploring a subject, color, or mood than by whether the author of that text is a man or woman.

**KE:** How do you choose poetry to set to song?

**JH:** When I begin a new song cycle, I usually have in mind a “subject” or a “color” or a “mood” I wish to explore. Most of the time, though, I don’t know right off what poetry will provide the right subject, color, or mood I’m looking for. I just start reading and rereading poets, both male and female, and usually the “right” text by the “right” poet presents itself.

The musical example, “To Harriet Monroe,” from *Letters from Edna*, shows Hall’s ability to set humorous texts as well as her ability to bring out Edna St. Vincent Millay’s serious financial need at the time. This particular letter is written to Millay’s literary agent and friend requesting a monetary advance. The comedic text is heightened by the broken phrase lengths, when Millay says, “spring is here, and I could be happy, except that I am broke.” Note how Hall sets the text. Her syllabification and phrase shapes mirror the emotional despair Millay must have felt. Hall’s traits include multi-metric phrases, no key signature so

that the music can modulate freely, and accompaniment figures that underscore and support the singer, sometimes doubling the voice and other times, providing harmonic coloration.

For access to additional repertoire, recordings, and information, please see [www.JulianaHall.com](http://www.JulianaHall.com). I believe Hall’s art song cycles are especially persuasive for their strong rhythmic drive, lyrical melodies, and superb text settings. Hall’s fascinating creativity in her compositions brings life to texts in a way that delights audiences, and thus she is worthy of more public appreciation for her extraordinary thread in the women composer’s musical narrative. Surely she will now join the ranks of other respected living American women art song composers such as Libby Larsen, Lori Laitman, and Judith Cloud.

*Katherine Eberle, mezzo-soprano, is an art song specialist who has given over one hundred solo recitals as a guest artist in Brazil, Canada, England, Ireland, the Netherlands, Russia, the Virgin Islands, and around the U.S. Her solo engagements include performances with the symphony orchestras of Detroit, Lansing, and Saginaw (Michigan), and Atlanta, Macon, Rome, and Valdosta (Georgia). She made her New York debut at Weill Recital Hall in 1994. She was a 1997 Artistic Ambassador for the United States Information Agency doing solo concert tours in South America and Korea. A Van Lawrence Fellowship Winner from the Voice Foundation, Eberle was a 2012 Obermann Fellow in Residence for her research in women composers. She has been a professor of voice at the University of Iowa since 1991. Eberle’s DVD recording, Pauline Viardot: Composer, Singer, Forgotten Muse, is available on Amazon.com. The IAWM is delighted to welcome Juliana Hall as a new IAWM member.*

## Wang Qiang: A Composer In Tune With Her Times

*Wang Qiang is the co-founder and President of the Chinese Women Composers’ Association and a long-time member of the IAWM. This article originally appeared in the South China Morning Post, Hong Kong, on December 27, 2012. We thank the Post for granting permission to reprint the article. The IAWM is pleased to honor Wang Qiang for her contributions to women in music and to the profession.*

The first time Wang Qiang felt completely free to write her music, she was already 56 years old. Fed up with the political inter-

ference that dominated most of her artistic life, the composer moved from Shanghai to Hong Kong in 1991. Hong Kong is not particularly known for the kind of artistic atmosphere that inspires creativity. But for Wang, one of a handful of contemporary women composers on the mainland, it was heaven. “I came here for an environment that allows me to compose freely,” said Wang, now 77. “I have written so much rubbish in my life, things I now have no wish to see any more.”

Wang’s early career in music composition was marred by political interference. But her eventful and dramatic life gave her plenty of inspiration. Born in Shan-dong in 1935, Wang joined the People’s

Liberation Army’s art troupe as a teenager and went to the border with North Korea as a volunteer during the Korean War. It was there the 16-year-old learned to compose war propaganda songs. “I like composing. It’s a way of expressing myself,” she said, her eyes twinkling with enthusiasm. “When the US planes were bombing overhead, we were dancing in the air raid shelters.”

After the war, she entered the Shanghai Conservatory of Music to study composition in 1955. She studied under Ding Shande, a French-trained musician who encouraged students to be liberal and creative in their compositions. But Wang soon found herself—along with other