

CONCERT SERIES

SongFest 2017 • Friday, June 9 • 7:30 p.m. • Thayer Hall

Mottetti di Montale (1980)

John Harbison (b. 1939) • Eugenio Montale (1896-1981)

from *Le Occasioni*

Lydia Brown, piano

Libro I: *La Primavera di Sottoripa*

- I. Lo sai
- II. Molti anni
- III. Brina sui vetri
- IV. Lontano
- V. Addi
- VI. La speranza

Libro II: *Il Saliscendi Bianco*

- VII. Il saliscendi
- VIII. Ecco il segno
- IX. Il ramarro
- X. Perché tardi
- XI. L'anima
- XII. Ti libero

Libro III: *Due Libri*

- XIII. La gondola
- XIV. Infuria
- XV. Al primo chiaro
- XVI. Il fiore

Libro IV: *Due Libri*

- XVII. La rana
- XVIII. Non recidere
- XIX. La canna
- XX. Ma così sia

Katya Gruzglina, soprano
Kelsey Lauritano, mezzo-soprano
Simone McIntosh, mezzo-soprano
Chloë Schaaf, mezzo-soprano
Anne Wright, soprano

PROGRAM NOTES

MOTTETTI DI MONTALE (1980) includes the complete twenty-poem cycle, *Mottetti*, from Eugenio Montale's book *Le Occasioni*, published in 1939. Essentially a set of autobiographical love lyrics described by the poet as "a novel in verse," Montale wrote the *Mottetti* between 1934 and 1939. The poems sketch a veiled narrative of love discovered and lost. The heroine of the sequence is Montale's fictional muse Clizia, roughly modeled on Dante's Beatrice, and in real life, actually the Canadian-American poet Irma Brandeis, whom he met in 1933 and was close to until she departed in 1938, and to whom the collection *Le Occasioni* is dedicated. Her fleeting presences and prolonged absences are the glowing center of the poems – numerous elusive references, mostly evoking her or occasions with her, flash by in these poems. Having admired Montale's work for more than a decade, my cycle was composed between 1978 and 1980, and more

Mottetti di Montale (1980)

Continued

recently has been arranged for mezzo-soprano and chamber ensemble. The piece in its original version for piano and voice premiered in 1980 and was dedicated, on his 85th birthday, to the poet, who, contrary to his usual practice, gave a rare permission for the setting of his poems, on examination of the already completed score. –John Harbison



EUGENIO MONTALE'S MOTTETTI

Eugenio Montale is one of the most prominent twentieth-century Italian poets. The recipient of the 1975 Nobel Prize for Literature, he was born in Genoa in 1896 and lived there until 1927.

Author of six collections of poetry, Montale is best known for the first three works: *Ossi di seppia* (*Cuttle-Fish Bones*, 1925, 1928), *Le occasioni* (*The occasions*, 1939) and *La Bufera e altro* (*The Storm and Other Things*, 1956). One may say that these collections belong to the three places where Montale lived. *The Occasions* is a collection in which the Florentine tradition, as expressed especially in the works of Dante and Petrarch, is renewed through a modern appreciation.

These collections mark one of the highest achievements of the modernist poetic trend that goes by the name of Hermeticism. This

poetics re-evaluates the role of the word in communication; in Hermeticism the role of poetry is the absolute realm of the word as the prophetic tool, which allows the poet (and by extension humankind) to interpret the world of the visible things. Furthermore, the poetic word, according to Hermeticism, puts this world into contact with the metaphysical dimension by casting such a revealing light on all, that the world itself appears transformed, even transparent, and ready to surrender to a novel understanding. Since this poetry talks about the eternal essence of that which is not seen, except through the ephemeral reality surrounding us, then Hermeticism becomes a poetics of absence.

Montale adheres to this poetics with a specific perspective, which remains constant throughout his poetic reflections: the word may show its prophetic power insofar as it is charged with the assumption that knowledge of the thing itself, including one's own self, is available only in its negative value. To Montale, it is essential to observe the world around us and keep in mind that this immanent and relative perspective is the only one granted to us: in other words, no metaphysical reassurance is taken for granted. Therefore, given Montale's focus on this world, his poetry focuses on objects, whether they are the elements of the landscape of childhood, or the tools of everyday life, or the emblematic little things that remind us of our loved ones. It is this attention to the objects that has invited critics from the start to compare Montale's poetics with that of T.S. Eliot's "objective correlative." Yet, Montale's poetry of objects always aims at suggesting through them, the presence of another reality, the presence of the reality of the Other.

Mottetti is the title of the second section of *The Occasions*. Its very title recalls Montale's passion and appreciation for music, the art that so often lends titles and references to the work of this poet. This strategy appears in some poems of the *Mottetti*. The eleventh of the series ends with a musical suggestion: *è là che insiste do re la sol sol...* In the thirteenth, *"La gondola che scivola in un forte,"* as Montale himself points out in a note, the "subdola canzone" may very well be the "canzone di Dappertutto" in the Second Act of *Hoffmann's Tales* by Offenbach.

The title, moreover, suggests other possible paths of textual interpretations: the motet is an ancient musical form, of medieval origin and often, although not exclusively, used for sacred compositions. Its polyphonic nature is based on the combination of at least two melodies. These structural elements seem relevant to Montale's understanding of his poems as motets. Two main motives run throughout the section: the dichotomy between absence and presence (reality of absence of the beloved and ideality of her presence), and the contrast between the desolation of the real world and the hope for its redemption (the alternation between the anguish for the political situation and the search for one's own consolation).

The sequence of *Mottetti* was written in the Florentine years, between 1934 and 1939, with the addition of two more poems in the 1940 second edition. These chronological data remark Montale's pervasive endeavor in the writing of this particular section. Montale was so taken by the project, that the title *Mottetti* was at first extended to include even the poem "Il balcone," which opens the entire collection *The Occasions*. In this poem Montale's motif of the liminality of existence, of our being always caught between two realms, becomes emblematic of the struggle of the self in the *Mottetti* section. –Ernesto Livorni