2016


Gregory Michael Gallagher
Louisiana State University and Agricultural and Mechanical College

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BEN MOORE’S *DEAR THEO*, FOR TENOR VOICE AND PIANO:
A PERFORMER’S GUIDE

A Dissertation

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
Louisiana State University and
Agriculture and Mechanical College
in partial fulfillment of the
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in

The School of Music

by
Gregory M. Gallagher
B.M., Cedarville University, 2011
M.M., Louisiana State University, 2013
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ABSTRACT

American composer Ben Moore (b. 1960) is a well-regarded painter, pianist, and composer whose compositions have been sung by leading singers of the Metropolitan Opera. This document serves as a performer’s guide to Moore’s song cycle Dear Theo. The song cycle utilizes Moore’s own text adaptations of letters written by Vincent van Gogh to his brother Theo. Chapter 1 presents a biographical sketch of Vincent van Gogh and his path to becoming a painter. Chapter 2 provides a brief life history of Ben Moore based on personal interview. Chapter 3 details the process of creating the song cycle Dear Theo. Chapter 4 is a performer’s guide to the cycle, providing explanations for the musical settings as well as suggestions for bringing the music and the text to life. The appendices include a transcription of an interview with Ben Moore, essays written by the composer about the work, and Moore’s personal research in adapting the texts for Dear Theo. It is the author’s hope that this document will provide the necessary information to further the success of singers performing the songs of Dear Theo, while bringing attention to this estimable composer for research, teaching, and performance.
INTRODUCTION

*Dear Theo* is a song cycle for tenor and piano composed by the well-regarded pianist, artist, and American composer, Ben Moore. Performances and recordings by famed Metropolitan Opera artists, including Nathan Gunn, Lawrence Brownlee, Susan Graham, Frederica von Stade, and Deborah Voigt, have brought increased awareness to Moore’s songs. The cycle consists of seven songs based on letters from the artist Vincent van Gogh to his brother Theo. The songs provide a window into the emotions and struggles of the artist’s short yet tragic life. This document will be a guide to performers seeking information required to present an insightful and accurate performance of Ben Moore’s song cycle.

Chapter one presents a biographical sketch of Vincent¹, derived from his letters, which number nearly a thousand, as well as first-hand accounts of other’s interactions with the artist. The chapter includes information on his diverse employments, the chronology of his numerous residencies across Europe, his major spheres of influence upon his worldview and his art, and his relationships with family members, friends, and romantic conquests. This chapter also examines his erratic behavior and ultimate madness.

Chapter two parallels the previous chapter by providing a short history of the life of composer and painter Ben Moore. This includes commentary on aspects of his overall musical style and important influences that helped shaped both his life and his music. This information is drawn primarily from personal interview with the composer.

Chapter three explores the creation of *Dear Theo* and Moore’s compositional process. Further, it examines Moore’s inspiration for composing the work, as well as his selection and

¹ Following the trend of the majority of written documentation on the artist, this author has chosen to use “Vincent” as opposed to van Gogh, when referring to the artist. This is based on his own preference for his named listings in art catalogues.
adaptation of text. Information for this chapter is drawn primarily from Moore’s personal essays, his research, and the personal interview.

Chapter four presents a performer’s guide to Dear Theo. The chapter is comprised of insight into the emotional context of the songs in addition to more detailed information on the historical and biographical background of the text. Commentary also addresses the complexity of songs, the collaboration of voice and piano within the cycle, vocal technique, and the relationship between text and music. Each of the seven songs receives individual analysis under subheadings within the chapter. These analyses are presented based on the interview with Moore, the background provided from biographical research, and from the performance experience of the author.

Appendices provide additional information from the composer. This includes a transcript of the interview with Ben Moore, his essay written on the creation of the song cycle, personal research documents on his adaptation of the original text, his preface from the score, a catalogue of his compositions, and a letter of permission for the musical examples included in this document. The conclusion summarizes the work as a whole and comments on its overall difficulty and use in teaching and performance.
CHAPTER 1:
VINCENT VAN GOGH

Even from his birth, Vincent van Gogh’s life would be linked with tragedy. Vincent was born on March 30 1852. One year before, to the day, Anna Carbentus and Theodorus van Gogh had a stillborn child, whom they had also christened Vincent.\(^2\) It is not clear whether Vincent, the painter, was ever made fully aware of the unusual circumstances surrounding his birth. By adulthood as evidenced in one of his letters, he was aware of his lost brother along with the year of his death, as printed on the grave marker, but not the coincidence of the day.\(^3\) After Vincent, the van Gogh’s had five more children: Anna, Theo, Elisabeth, Willemien, and Cornelis.

The family life of the van Gogh’s exemplified the precepts of familial duty and social respectability due to their middle-class social standing as well as Theodorus’ (Dorus for short) vocation as a reverend in the Dutch Reformed church.\(^4\) In a letter written by Anna, she states, “We are shaped first by family, then by the world.”\(^5\) Following the same ideas, Vincent would later write, “The family feeling and our love for each other is so strong that the heart is uplifted…”\(^6\) Regrettably, this feeling of connection and familial bond would not always be the case in Vincent’s life.


\(^5\) Ibid., 23.

\(^6\) Ibid., 25.
Vincent’s childhood days held a similar routine, with most of the activities centering on the family. They would walk for an hour in town to maintain their social presence, return and spend much of the day in Anna’s garden behind the house, and eat dinners together followed by family history lessons. At day’s end one parent would read aloud to the children. Indeed, the desire to keep the family’s name in good reputation and good social standing was so important to Anna and her husband that she would not let the children play outside, so as to maintain good company and avoid “associating with those not of our own class.”

As a child Vincent’s mother introduced him to reading, writing, and drawing. He loved to read and was “consuming books at a breakneck pace that hardly let up until the day he died. He would start with one book by an author and then devour the entire oeuvre in a few weeks.” He also enjoyed writing and possessed a “feverish speed” which no doubt aided in his numerous correspondences throughout the years. Anna introduced her children to the arts, including playing the piano, singing, and drawing. The children would make drawings or other crafts for family birthdays or holidays as gifts to one another. Vincent on occasion attempted to draw several images using models such as cats or trees but ended up so frustrated that he destroyed his work and never drew again as child. He was preoccupied by nature, an inspiration most likely formed due to the parental constraints of being outdoors. This fascination would continue with him for the rest of his life. He enjoyed observing plants and animals and would sneak out to take

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7 Naifeh and Smith, Van Gogh 26-29.
8 Ibid., 32.
9 Ibid., 29.
10 Ibid., 36.
11 Ibid., 37.
long walks alone, especially when it was at night or storming. He also would collect things, such as flowers and insects, and take them to his room to study, observe, and categorize them. Such development of observational study would lay the groundwork for his artistic eye.

Along side his positive attributes, from an early age Vincent exhibited a quick temper and unruly behavior. Many accounts from the family histories indicate that he was “obstinate,” “strange” with a “difficult temper,” and that he was often punished more than the other siblings. Schoolmates remembered him as moody and aloof. In a memoir on his life written by his sister-in-law Johanna van Gogh-Bonger, she writes, “As a child he was of difficult temper, often troublesome and self-willed, and his bringing up was not fitted to counterbalance these faults, as the parents were very tender-hearted especially for their eldest.” He enjoyed solace and isolation and only found true companionship in his brother Theo. This close relationship did not last long in childhood and would not return until later in life when their habitual correspondence began. Vincent later in life would look back on his childhood and write, “My youth has been austere and cold, and sterile.”

13 Ibid., 43.
14 Ibid., 37-38.
15 Ibid., 42.
17 Roskill, 42.
At the age of seven, Vincent was sent to the public school in Zundert, where his uphill battle with education would begin. Vincent’s difficult behavior followed him to school and his constant punishment by the schoolmaster eventually led his parents to withdraw him from school.\textsuperscript{19} Dorus and Anna decided to hire a governess and educate the children through homeschooling, suggesting that bad company fostered Vincent’s unsuccessful start in school.\textsuperscript{20} After three years with the governess, Vincent’s continued behavioral problems led his parents to send him to boarding school.\textsuperscript{21} At age eleven, his parents first sent him to the Provily School in Zevenbergen. In a recent expansive and authoritative biography on the artist’s life by Naifeh and Smith, they write, “Nothing could have been more paralyzing for a sensitive boy with habits of sullenness in public and temperament in private than the emotional exposure of boarding school.”\textsuperscript{22} His sensitivity combined with his strange behavior and being the youngest student at the school made Vincent extremely homesick. He wrote home often, begging his parents to let him come home, resulting in a trip to the school by his father and a visit home for Vincent at Christmas. After returning he wrote constantly again, until the summer when his parents finally allowed him to leave the Provily School.\textsuperscript{23} They did not, however, allow him to come home, but merely change schools, further away from home.

In 1866, Vincent was sent to the Rijksschool Willem II in Tilburg. While not much is written about this period, the pattern was much the same, with Vincent retreating into himself

\textsuperscript{19} Naifeh and Smith, \textit{Van Gogh}, 43.

\textsuperscript{20} Ibid., 44.

\textsuperscript{21} Ibid., 44.

\textsuperscript{22} Ibid., 46.

\textsuperscript{23} Ibid., 46-47.
and constantly wishing to return home. Each holiday visit home only made matters worse upon his return to school. While there, Vincent took art class under the instruction of Constantin Huysmans, who was a patron of the arts and drawing as education for the masses. Huysmans constantly encouraged his students to draw from nature and develop keen observation skills. Despite the probable influence, Vincent never acknowledged Huysmans, which may be due to the emotional turmoil of homesickness as well as a disinterest in the subject at the time. In 1868, only two months before the semester ended, and without notice Vincent took matters into his own hands and left the school in Tilburg, walking seven hours home to Zundert. The fifteen-year-old Vincent would remain home with no obligations, except his own isolation, for a year and a half.

Dorus and Anna were shamed by Vincent’s behavior upon his return home and sought the help of Dorus’ brother Vincent (known as Cent). Cent was quite the opposite of his reverend brother. He was an entrepreneur and owned his own paint shop that sold paints, artists’ supplies, and eventually prints. He along with business partner Adolphe Goupil, offered their respectable opinion to clients on the art fashion of the time and evaluated the work of new artists as to whether their work was salable. The also presented gallery shows of new artist’s work. With popularity and success, the business partners eventually set up branches of Goupil & Cie in The

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24 Naifeh and Smith, *Van Gogh*, 49.


26 Ibid., 16.


28 Ibid., 49.

29 Ibid., 63-67.

As would be the pattern throughout his life, Vincent wholeheartedly devoted himself to his new career. He absorbed as much information about art and painting through literature, visits to museums, and from his boss H. G. Tersteeg. Jo Bonger writes, “Tersteeg sent to the parents good reports about Vincent’s zeal and capacities, and like his grandfather in his time, he is ‘the diligent studious youth’ whom everybody likes.” Vincent worked primarily in the back room with inventory and preparing prints and art supplies to be shipped. Naifeh and Smith write, “Within a few years, Vincent was dealing with some of the firm’s best clients. He demonstrated an instinctive savvy about value and rarity, fashion and demand, and no reticence whatsoever about the imperative to sell…So confident was Vincent in his new role that he reassured his parents he would never again have to look for a position.”

All of Vincent’s successes began to change when Cent fell immensely ill, beginning a process that would ultimately change Vincent’s career. First, Tersteeg took the majority of control for the business and with it his thoughts of Vincent changed. He “had been bothered by Vincent’s strange, unpolished manner which he attributed to his rustic upbringing.” As such, Tersteeg began to more publicly show his true feelings for Vincent, which in turn would cause

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32 Roskill, 40.

33 Naifeh and Smith, *Van Gogh*, 74-75.

34 Ibid., 75.
the young man to retaliate. Vincent sequestered himself, causing the family to worry about his isolation once again. His only consolation was a visit from his brother Theo, in August of 1872 when they renewed their childhood bond. It was a bond that Vincent would hold close for the rest of his life and was the basis for their continued correspondence. It was after this encounter in August 1872 that their lengthy correspondence began. Secondly, Vincent had developed a crush on a woman who did not share his affections and who became engaged to another man. Vincent reacted, “If I cannot get a good woman, I shall take a bad one…I would sooner be with a bad whore than be alone.” Vincent began to seek out prostitutes, a pattern that would continue throughout his life. For unknown reasons, Vincent confided this to his boss, who in turn reported it to Vincent’s family. Vincent’s terse relationship with Tersteeg, the family’s knowledge of his recent disgrace, and his low number in the draft lottery, caused Dorus and Anna to seek new options to avoid shame and scandal. (To have a child drafted and not have the money to buy him out of service was an unspeakable social shame.) The solution adopted was to transfer Vincent within the company to a branch in London. Theo was forced to leave school and join the branch in Brussels to provide additional income for the family. Vincent was also given a raise and bonus in order to help supplement his family’s income as well as hide any evidence of scandal.

35 Naifeh and Smith, *Van Gogh*, 75.
36 Roskill, 40.
37 Naifeh and Smith, *Van Gogh*, 77-78.
38 Ibid., 78.
39 Ibid., 79.
40 Ibid., 79-81.
In London, Vincent’s pattern of behavior would repeat itself again. He immersed himself into his work in a new location but soon became isolated and avoided any form of social situation. Naifeh and Smith write, “His encounters in London hint at a faltering self-confidence and rising sense of shame.”

Again he would fall in love with unreciprocated feelings, this time with the daughter of the woman who ran the boarding house in which he lived. He was dejected upon discovery of her engagement to another. Vincent would isolate himself further, not eating and ignoring his appearance, and would console himself by viewing art that came into the shop, reading the literature of Jules Michelet and German Romantic poets, and seeking out encounters with prostitutes, resulting in a cover-up transfer to Paris in 1875.

During his time in Paris, Vincent turned to religion, which quickly grew into a new obsession. His overriding influence was Thomas à Kempis’s *Imitatio Christi*, which encouraged “withdrawal from mundane pursuits and renunciation of earthly pleasures.” He rejected old habits and immersed himself in reading and studying the Bible. So fervent was his newfound obsession that he often became annoyed with customers in the shop and would neglect many of his duties. When Vincent returned home from Christmas in January 1876, the company gave him a three-month notice of termination. While the some of the reasons and details are unclear, it

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41 Naifeh and Smith, *Van Gogh*, 88.

42 Roskill, 42-43.

43 Naifeh and Smith, *Van Gogh*, 96-97.

44 Sund, 31.

is known that Vincent was not surprised by his dismissal perhaps related to his unauthorized trip to his family’s new home in Etten for the holidays.46

Instead of following his normal pattern of returning home, he went to England with a new ambition of becoming an evangelist. In April 1876, Vincent took a job at a boarding school for boys in Ramsgate. Vincent was promised a salary after a one-month trial, which he never received and was paid in only free room and board. When the school moved to Isleworth two months later, he eventually left for a better position at a school run by the Methodist minister Thomas Slade-Jones. While in Isleworth, Jones allowed for Vincent to not only work at the school but to also assist in services at the church. Vincent soon desired to leave his role as tutor and become a preacher. After being allowed to preach his first sermon in October, Vincent left the school and took a brief job as volunteer lay preacher in Turnham Green.47

Despite Vincent’s enthusiasm and mild successes, the family remained unsupportive of his new career path and convinced him to leave England and return home. Dorus insisted that to become a preacher, Vincent would need to study, go to school, and obtain a job while doing so. Through more familial connections Dorus found his son a position at Blussé and Van Braam Booksellers in Dordrecht.48 In a recollection on van Gogh from Paulus Görlitz, Vincent’s roommate in Dordrecht, he writes

He was a special kind of person and had, in addition, a special outward appearance…Van Gogh provoked amusement because of his attitudes and behavior…Evening after evening, van Gogh pored over the Bible, extracting excerpts and ideas for sermons…strict piety was at the core of his being…He lived as an ascetic and permitted himself only a single luxury, a pipefull [sic] of tobacco…He became perceptibly more melancholy, and his daily work cost him

46 Naifeh and Smith, Van Gogh, 114.

47 Jansen, Luijten, and Bakker, Ever Yours, 8.

48 Naifeh and Smith, Van Gogh, 142-143.
increasingly greater effort. He was not suited to his job, and the job was not suitable for him.\textsuperscript{49}

With some persuasion from Görlitz\textsuperscript{50} and continued pressure from Vincent, the family eventually allowed Vincent to live in Amsterdam to pursue Theology with aid from his uncles. Before admitted into a University, he was required to pass a State examination. Naifeh and Smith state, “That was a challenge even for high school students with all the necessary preparatory classes…Only a small fraction of high school graduates qualified to enter one of the country’s three universities. For Vincent, who had walked away from the Tilburg School as a sophomore nine years earlier, the matriculation examinations presented an almost insuperable barrier.”\textsuperscript{51} In a letter to Theo, Vincent wrote, “As to me I must become a good clergyman, who has something to say that is right and may be of use in the world, and perhaps it is better that I have a relatively long time of preparation, and am strongly confirmed in a staunch conviction before I am called to speak to others about it…”\textsuperscript{52}

Unsurprisingly, after the initial excitement and perseverance wore off, Vincent’s commitment waned and after a year of studying he gave up out of frustration, exacerbated by his constant study of the bible and spending Sundays walking from church to church to hear numerous sermons on a single day. During this time Vincent’s ideas of religion began to shift, especially after hearing a sermon from Eliza Laurillard. He proposed “finding beauty in nature was not just one way of knowing God…it was the only way. And those who could see that


\textsuperscript{50} Ibid., 18.

\textsuperscript{51} Naifeh and Smith, \textit{Van Gogh}, 158-159.

\textsuperscript{52} Roskill, 109.
beauty and express it—writers, musicians, artists—were God’s truest intermediaries.” Such a message resonated with the young Vincent who was passionate about both art and religion. This new perception of the relationship between art and religion spurred him to draw again. The drawings began primarily as ways of communicating places or memories in his correspondences with family and friends. Trying to facilitate the original plan, Dorus and the Reverend Jones arranged for Vincent to be a part of a training course for evangelists in Brussels that allowed students to participate in fieldwork while working towards certificates for the ministry. Before being allowed to enter the three-year course, Vincent was given a three-month trial period, which he failed. This did not upset Vincent in his new found “religion.” He now sought to be a laborer for the Lord instead of a scholarly parson. With no prospects for the future, Vincent left his pursuit of becoming a parson and began to consider the area of the Borinage in hopes of finding work. He wrote, “I should very much like to go there as an Evangelist…If I could work quietly for about three years in such a district, always learning and observing, then I should not come back from there without having something to say that was really worth hearing.” Later he wrote, “Involuntarily, I have become in the family more or less a kind of impossible and suspect personage, at least somebody whom they do not trust, so how could I in any way be of any use to anybody? For this reason above all,

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53 Naifeh and Smith, Van Gogh, 171.

54 Sund, 35.

55 Naifeh and Smith, Van Gogh, 180.

56 Roskill, 114.
I think the best and the most reasonable thing for me to do is to go away, and keep at a convenient distance, so that I shall cease to exist for you all.”

The Borinage, also known as the “black country,” was a coal-mining district in eastern Belgium. In January of 1879, he obtained an appointment as a lay preacher, which included the tasks of Bible readings, teaching children, and visiting the sick. Vincent soon let his preaching assignments fall to the side as he would became more and more interested in serving the poor and nursing the sick and injured. “He identified so much with the poor that he gave away all his possessions and lived in a small hut, where he slept on the ground.” This overzealous behavior caused the church members to bring in an inspector from the Evangelical Committee, ultimately resulting in his termination. Throughout his time at the Borinage, Vincent would draw sketches included in his letters, of the miners’ clothes and tools while they were at work. As his drawings increased, a new plan to become an artist began forming in Vincent’s mind. He decided to have his drawings critiqued by nearby artist Jules Breton, but on his arrival at the studio, was too afraid and turned back. This seemingly failed trip, however, was monumental in shaping the rest of Vincent’s life. Conveying his new insights, he wrote home

I earned some crusts of bread along the road here and there in exchange for some drawings I had in my valise. But when my ten francs were gone, I had to spend the last few nights in the open air…But then it started to drizzle, which did not exactly improve matters. It was in that wretched situation that I felt my energy returning, and I said to myself: in spite of everything I shall rise to my feet again.

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57 Roskill, 117.

58 Jansen, Luijten, and Bakker, Ever Yours, 9.

59 Ibid., 9.

60 Naifeh and Smith, Van Gogh, 199.

61 Roskill, 49.
I will pick up the pencil which I dropped in my deep discouragement and start drawing again. From that moment everything seems to have changed. I have started, and my pencil has become somewhat docile, and is getting more so every day.\(^62\)

Theo, who had seen first hand his brother’s drawings throughout his life, encouraged his brother’s new career path, and at the age of twenty-seven, Vincent decided to become an artist.

Vincent moved back to Brussels in hopes of training and building his new career. He worked on countless drawing exercises and fervently studied anatomy books studying prints and images, while making copies of other artists’ works. While in Brussels, Vincent met Anthon van Rappard, who became a friend and artistic mentor to Vincent. While their initial contact was strained with Rappard describing Vincent as “violent,” “fanatical” and “not easy to get along with,” he eventually sought to help Vincent and invited him into his art studio.\(^63\) Vincent also applied to the Académie Royal des Breaux-Arts. His time there was limited and little is known besides the fact that Vincent was frustrated with his experience there and he saved none of his drawings from the academy.\(^64\) Vincent continued drawing and spent what little money he had on supplies and an unending need for models. Vincent insisted on drawing from models, which of course had to be paid. Hard pressed for income due to his numerous failures thus far, Vincent began to ask for money from his family. Dorus had already given more than he could afford, but Theo’s new promotion to Vincent’s old post in Paris provided him the means to supplement his brother’s income, a habit that would continue until Vincent’s death.\(^65\)

\(^{62}\) Nordenfalk, 21.

\(^{63}\) Naifeh and Smith, *Van Gogh*, 224.

\(^{64}\) Ibid., 228.

\(^{65}\) Sund, 43.
Following a familiar pattern, Vincent returned home to his parents’ parsonage in Etten. After settling in, Rappard visited Vincent in his new location and together they would go for long walks and draw the Etten landscapes throughout the summer.\(^{66}\) Even at this early stage, Vincent’s keen eye for detail and observation informed his style and characteristic brushstrokes as a painter of portraits and landscapes (Figure 1.1). Another benefit to his return to Etten was Vincent’s desire to mentor with his cousin and painter Anton Mauve. Naifeh and Smith write, “Mauve represented the ideal of accomplishment and approval that had become Vincent’s

![Figure 1.1 Marsh with Water Lilies, June 1881](https://example.com/figure1.1)

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\(^{66}\) Naifeh and Smith, *Van Gogh*, 234-235.

With a renewed sense of self, Vincent began to seek renewal elsewhere, falling in love with the recently widowed Kee Vos. As with the women before, Vincent fell deeply in love and threw himself at the young girl. She refused his advances but Vincent would not accept her rejection. Even after she moved to Amsterdam, Vincent continued to write to her of his affection in hopes that his persuasion would change her mind. When this did not work, Vincent travelled to Amsterdam to see her. When he called on her, the family had seemed to hide her, saying she was not home, yet Vincent continually came back for three days having heated arguments with her father. “At one point, he put his hand over a gas-lamp flame and demanded, ‘Let me see her for as long as I can keep my hand in this flame.’”

As one would expect, Vincent’s attempts proved futile. Upon his return home, his family was yet again disgraced by his behavior and his father was in an outrage. Their arguments became so heated on the matter of Kee, that Dorus ultimately threw Vincent out of the house. He turned to his cousin Mauve where he stayed in The Hague. While there he learned the rudiments of watercolor and tried his hand in oil studies. Vincent wrote, “With painting my real career begins.” Despite a new interest in painting, however, Vincent still preferred his drawing skills and would not fully take up painting until later. After the traumatizing rejection of Kee, Vincent turned away from his faith in religion altogether. He wrote,

Then, not at once, but very soon, I felt that love die within me; a void, an infinite void came in instead. You know, I believe in God, and I did not doubt the power of love, but then I felt something like My God, my God, why hast Thou forsaken

68 Naifeh and Smith, Van Gogh, 248.
69 Ibid., 249.
70 Jansen, Luijten, and Bakker, Ever Yours, 11.
71 Naifeh and Smith, Van Gogh, 252.
me? and everything became a blank. I thought have I been deceiving myself? Oh, God, there is no God! That cold terrible reception in Amsterdam was too much for me, my eyes were opened at last.\textsuperscript{72}

Vincent returned to the company of prostitutes for solace. He found the thirty-two year old pregnant prostitute Clasina Maria Hoornik, known as Sien, and took her into his home. After a surprise visit from Mauve, he tired to count for her presence in his home as that of model, but Mauve was not fooled and fought with Vincent over the disgrace. That relationship ended just after a month.\textsuperscript{73} Vincent did use Sien as a model frequently for his drawings, yet he was also infatuated with her and sought to construct his own family between her and her unborn child, after being rejected by his family. One such drawing was his first nude, entitled \textit{Sorrow} (Figure 1.2), which Vincent called “the best figure I have drawn yet.”\textsuperscript{74} Naifeh and Smith describe Sien:

\begin{quote}
Ille-tempered and prone to fits of anger, she swore like a sailor, bathed rarely, smoked cigars, and drank like a man. A persistent throat affliction had left her with a strange, husky voice…Years of drinking and smoking, malnutrition, multiple pregnancies, at least one miscarriage, and the wear of her nightly work had reduced her body to a ‘miserable condition,’ according to Vincent, “a worthless rag,” racked by pain, anemia, and the “ugly symptoms” of consumption. To Vincent, however, she was “an angel.”\textsuperscript{75}
\end{quote}

Vincent’s relationship caused even more shame to his family, yet still they did not cut him off completely and he still received funds from his parents and brother. During this time in his life, Vincent used his family’s money to spend on Sien’s medical bills, furnishings for their

\begin{footnotes}
\item[73] Naifeh and Smith, \textit{Van Gogh}, 257.
\item[74] Ibid., 281.
\item[75] Ibid., 283.
\end{footnotes}
apartment, and Vincent’s continued art supplies. Vincent completely ignored his own health and even was hospitalized for a venereal disease at the same time that Sien went into labor.\textsuperscript{76}

During this time, Vincent became obsessed with drawing and even sought a career as illustrator. He also had a small perspective frame built for him, an $11\frac{1}{2} \times 7$ frame with intersecting wires that provided a grid, greatly aiding in Vincent’s sense of perspective for his art.\textsuperscript{77} Naifeh and Smith describe his works saying, “Rough as they are, these pencil and charcoal

![Figure 1.2 Sorrow, April 1882](image)

\textsuperscript{76} Jansen, Luijten, and Bakker, \textit{Ever Yours}, 12.

\textsuperscript{77} Naifeh and Smith, \textit{Van Gogh}, 292.

\textsuperscript{78} Naifeh and Smith \textit{Gallery: Black and White Images}. 
drawings, taken together, represent Vincent’s first effort at portraiture—the first of many efforts over the coming years that would, like these, reveal far more about the artist and his inner world than about the sitter or the real world.” He also tried his hand at lithographs but his rough manners were not patient enough and his temper would get the best of him. Simultaneously to these developments, Vincent began to disagree with Rappard’s ideas and advice, ultimately severing his only friendship.

When Vincent began expressing his desire to marry Sien, his family stepped in once again. Vincent’s health was still in shambles after being hospitalized and he was in debt with no source of income except contributions from his brother. Theo insisted Vincent leave the woman and child offering him commissions for his art if he would agree to leave Sien and give up drawing for painting, a more salable form of work. Vincent agreed and left behind his first true love for the wet moors of Drenthe, located in the northern Netherlands.

Vincent had assumed reports from other artists were accurate in saying Drenthe was full of unspoiled landscapes, yet it was quite the opposite. Despite its dampness and darkness, Vincent did find a beauty worth capturing there, but primarily in the form of drawings with minimal work on paintings he had promised Theo. The dark atmosphere and complete isolation caused him to fall into a deep depression and suffer his first recorded psychotic episode. After three months, Vincent left Drenthe for his parent’s new home in Nuenen in 1883, where he would stay for two years.

79 Naifeh and Smith, *Van Gogh*, 290.

80 Ibid., 345.


82 Naifeh and Smith, *Van Gogh*, 356.
Vincent sequestered himself with continued arguments between him and Dorus. Despite his unruly temper, his parents provided him with his own studio on the grounds of the parsonage. Vincent’s main goals in art were to paint peasants and laborers at work, similar to the drawings he had done in the Borinage. He began with an extended series on weavers at their looms. His paintings are darker and coarse, depicting the peasant agrarian way of life. This period fostered images such as his masterpiece, *The Potato Eaters* (Figure 1.3). He also began painting still-lifes and even had a few private students. Vincent began to appease his parents when he wholeheartedly drew from his experience in the Borinage and nursed his mother to health after

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fracturing her hip in a fall.\textsuperscript{85} This placation was reflected in his art with turning again to sketches and drawings of landscapes and the garden to raise his mother’s spirits.\textsuperscript{86}

Notwithstanding his new attainments, Vincent would find trouble in the realm of romantic conquest again. Tired of the studio his parent’s provided, Vincent rented a studio space near a Catholic parsonage, where he met and fell in love with neighbor Margot Begemann. Unlike previous conquests before Sien, Margot fell deeply in love with Vincent and together they hid their relationship from their families.\textsuperscript{87} Margot’s complete infatuation with Vincent and claims of love unto death and other symptoms caused Vincent to make the relationship known to the families and admit Margot to a doctor for fear of “brain fever.”\textsuperscript{88} Vincent’s desire to marry Margot mistakenly led the families to believe Margot was pregnant and they planned to move her to another city. In a final meeting, Margot met Vincent in a field and swallowed strychnine.\textsuperscript{89} Her attempted suicide was unsuccessful, but she was sent away to the town of Utrecht, which ended their affair. Vincent again turned his gaze to painting with a new fascination of color and its theories. He became enamored with the theories of contemporary colors and coloristic opposites in the writings of Charles Blanc as well as the examples found in Eugène Delacroix’s paintings.\textsuperscript{90} With his public humiliation from his recent affair, his increasing interest in painting

\textsuperscript{85} Naifiéh and Smith, \textit{Van Gogh}, 381.
\textsuperscript{86} Ibid., 382-383.
\textsuperscript{87} Ibid., 401.
\textsuperscript{88} Ibid., 402.
\textsuperscript{89} Ibid., 403.
\textsuperscript{90} Sund, 84-88.
and color, and the sickness and death of his father in the spring of 1885, Vincent moved to Antwerp in January 1886 with the hope of pursuing a realistic painting career.

While in Antwerp, Vincent continued his exploration of color and sought inspiration from the past by visiting numerous art museums, including the Rijksmuseum. In a letter to Theo Vincent wrote, “Color expresses something by itself and one cannot do without this, one must use it; that which is beautiful, really beautiful—is also correct…”91 Vincent went to Antwerp specifically to learn and gather the skills needed to be a great painter. Sund writes, “His primary goal was to advance his figural work through conventional academic study: drawing from nude models and plaster casts.”92 Vincent first looked for models as he had in previous cities, especially among the prostitutes of the streets. Models were hard to come by, because of the metropolitan nature of Antwerp and people’s unwillingness to pose for an unknown artist with no money. Vincent joined the Antwerp Academy. Here he could participate in free painting classes, but he soon left over disagreements with the instructors who were too academic and “disapproved of personal expression.”93 While in Antwerp, Vincent’s health deteriorated significantly and he had to be treated for venereal disease as well as dental problems stemming from his poor habits of hygiene.94 Near the end of his time at Antwerp, Vincent experienced his second recorded psychotic breakdown. The causes are unknown yet Naifeh and Smith propose it resulted from his constant drinking, the surprise news of Theo’s courtship to his eventual wife,

91 Roskill, 242.
92 Sund, 120.
93 Jansen, Luijten, and Bakker, Ever Yours, 18.
94 Ibid., 18.
feelings of abandonment, or his own desolate appearance due to his health and hospitalization.\textsuperscript{95} After two months in Antwerp, Theo convinced Vincent to come live with him in Paris.

While the plan was for Vincent to arrive in the summer of 1886 so that Theo could settle into a larger apartment after an expected promotion, he could not contain his fervent nature and arrived in March unannounced to Theo except for note at his office on the day of his arrival asking Theo to meet him at the Louvre. Painting at this time was shifting from the Impressionism of Monet to the Avante-Garde of Seurat, yet what knowledge Vincent had of this is unknown. Because of strained funding now that he lived with his brother and his inability to afford the expensive Paris models, Vincent turned to painting still life and self-portraits.\textsuperscript{96} “His brushwork became looser and his colors brighter under the influence of Impressionism, which was ubiquitous in Paris.”\textsuperscript{97} The dominant influence on his painting of this time was discovery of Japanese art. Vincent purchased Japanese collectibles, wood blocks, and prints hanging them everywhere. He praised their devices of “emphatic contours, flat areas of single colors, and perspectival effects.”\textsuperscript{98} Art historian Judy Sund provides an extensive chapter on the role of japonisme on his art and marks the colourism as the most influential aspect to Vincent’s painting style.\textsuperscript{99} Vincent sought to leave the bustle of Paris in search of the “Japanese colors” that so inspired him, but he did not leave unchanged. Jansen writes,

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{95} Naifeh and Smith, \textit{Van Gogh}, 488.
\item \textsuperscript{96} Sund, 121.
\item \textsuperscript{97} Jansen, Luijten, and Bakker, \textit{Ever Yours rs}, 20.
\item \textsuperscript{98} Ibid., 21.
\item \textsuperscript{99} Sund, 159-160.
\end{itemize}
It is astonishing to see how quickly Van Gogh, coming from the north with his gaze still fixed on the past, managed to reinvent himself in Paris in little over a year, becoming an artist who had shed all dogma. The modern Van Gogh was born in Paris; a fact he was well aware of when he left the city two years later. During that time there had also been a fundamental change in Theo and Vincent’s relationship…in terms of viewing each other more as equals. Previously Vincent had felt the need to justify his artistic choices and convictions, whereas now he and Theo were involved in a joint undertaking.  

Vincent sought his newly found palette of colors in the southern city of Arles.

Vincent’s time in Arles was the peak of his career. He was constantly painting and so many of his famous masterpieces known to the public were painted in Arles. “…He paints the landscape, the glorious wealth of blossoms in Spring in a series of orchids in bloom, the cornfields under the burning sun at harvest time, the almost intoxicating richness of colors of the autumn, the glorious beauty of the gardens and parks… ‘The Sower’, ‘The Sunflowers,’ ‘The Starlit Night’…his creative impulse and power are inexhaustible.” When funds were low and a disagreement with a landlady forced Vincent to look for residence elsewhere, he rented the famous Yellow House. With its four rooms, the Yellow House served as a possibility for Vincent’s utopian dream of a community of artists that supported each other which would never come to fruition.

Needing someone to share the burden of finances, Vincent reached out to many painters. While Paul Gauguin was not his first choice, he heavily campaigned for him to join him in

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100 Jansen, Luijten, and Bakker, *Ever Yours*, 22.
101 Roskill, 71.
102 Naifeh and Smith, *Van Gogh*, 582.
Arles. Gauguin cared little about Vincent’s communal ideas but eventually agreed when his funds also grew short. Vincent viewed Gauguin as a mentor and friend and tried to emulate some of Gauguin’s style in his own paintings. In her book on the two painters, Silverman writes:

“During their collaboration, Gauguin challenged van Gogh to follow him in pursuit of the dream, imagination, and the mystery of the infinite, and to explore new visual techniques of dematerialization suited to evoking them. Although van Gogh experimented with expressive color and attempted to modulate his brushwork, he resisted Gauguin’s charge to relinquish the model and diminish his anchorage in nature…”

Often resisting Gauguin, Vincent would engage him in arguments described as “terribly electric.” Many opinions on the relationship between the two painters have proposed, including one of a homosexual nature based on psychoanalysis of specific works at the time, as well as reports of Vincent periodically standing over Gauguin’s bed watching him while he slept.

Perhaps the most analysis comes from the zenith of Vincent’s time at Arles, December 23, 1888, with the cutting off of his own earlobe. Copious information mixed with numerous myths surround this event. What is clear is that Gauguin in another frenzied argument had announced that he would leave Arles. Vincent wielded a razor he retrieved from the bathroom at him, but lost his courage and retreated into the house, where he then severed his own ear.

Some psychologists describe the ear as a phallic symbol and view his motivation behind the act

104 Naifeh and Smith, *Van Gogh*, 589.

105 Silverman, 185.

106 Roskill, 301.

107 Fell, 131.

108 Ibid., 141.

109 Ibid., 142.
as a possible castration that resulted in an “outing” of his deeper homosexual desires for Gauguin.\textsuperscript{110} “Whatever the case, he suffered a massive loss of blood, yet he had the strength and determination to carefully wrap the bloody ear in paper and take it to Rachel,” a prostitute both men had each visited in Arles.\textsuperscript{111} He was taken to the hospital on Christmas Eve where Theo rushed to his side. From this point until his death, Vincent would suffer attacks of mental illness, often in intervals consisting of confusion, fears, and hallucinations. After his hospitalization, doctors assumed that he could live a normal life in the outside world, yet his neighbors petitioned for his incarceration, which resulted in Vincent voluntarily committing himself to the asylum Saint-Paul de Mausole in Saint-Rémy.\textsuperscript{112}

During his year-long stay at the asylum he continued to paint and was lucid with only a few violent attacks.\textsuperscript{113} While his attacks were not frequent, they lasted weeks or months at a time and included tendencies such as eating dirt or paint.\textsuperscript{114} He continued to paint, producing some of his greatest works including \textit{Starry Night} (Figure 1.4). A softening of lines and colors is characteristic of his work during this time.\textsuperscript{115} During this time, two of Vincent’s works were submitted to an exhibition, including \textit{Red Vineyard}, which was later sold and would be the sole

\begin{footnotes}
\footnotetext[111]{Fell, 142.}
\footnotetext[112]{Sund, 246.}
\footnotetext[113]{Roskill, 344.}
\footnotetext[114]{Jansen, Luijten, and Bakker, \textit{Ever Yours}, 29.}
\footnotetext[115]{Sund, 252.}
\end{footnotes}
painting he would ever sell during his lifetime. In September of 1889, Vincent wrote to Theo saying, “Yes, we must finish with this place, I cannot do the two things at once, work and take no end of pains to live with these queer patients here—it is upsetting…In the long run I shall lose the faculty for work here…” Never wanting to abandon his painting, Vincent decided to leave the asylum.

He first went to Paris where he met Theo’s son with whom he shared a name, yet the bustle of the city was maddening for him and he decided to move on to the city of Auvers-sur-Oise. There, he was placed under the care of Dr. Gachet who held constant watch over him and

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116 Naifeh and Smith Gallery: Color Images
117 Ibid., 340.
118 Roskill, 327.
became a close friend. While Vincent only spent nine weeks in Auvers, he would paint over a hundred finished works.\textsuperscript{119} Even up to his final day, Vincent would write to Theo thanking him for his constant support and wishing that he would someday not be a burden to him.\textsuperscript{120} On Sunday, July 27, 1890, Vincent shot himself in in the chest in the middle of a field and then returned to his room where he was later found groaning.\textsuperscript{121} The circumstances surrounding Vincent’s suicide are shrouded in mystery and authors Naifeh and Smith in their appendix on the matter offer multiple defenses for a tragic accident.\textsuperscript{122} Whatever the circumstances behind the mysterious gunshot, Vincent would die two days later with his brother at his side. Many theories have been offered as to the motivation behind his suicide yet one psychologist notes that even much earlier in his life he had hinted at ending his life during bouts of depression and might have finally succumbed to his notion of no longer remaining a burden on Theo’s life.\textsuperscript{123}

Vincent van Gogh was a radical human being fueled by passion. Despite adversity and constant struggles, his overriding goal would be to find a place in life. Often misunderstood, Vincent merely sought to portray a world where he always found beauty. His love of humanity spurred him on to make sense of the world around him. Finally discovering his calling, he sought merely to leave a piece of himself behind. Such emotion and vulnerability displayed in his life and imprinted in his artwork have aided in the oeuvre’s lasting impression.

\textsuperscript{119} Sund, 286.
\textsuperscript{120} Roskill, 338-339.
\textsuperscript{121} Sund, 302.
\textsuperscript{122} Naifeh and Smith, \textit{Van Gogh}, 869-879.
Ben Moore is an acclaimed pianist, artist, teacher, and American composer. On January 2, 1960, Moore was born to parents Roger and Joanna, the fourth of six children. At the time of his birth, the Moore’s lived in the town of Syracuse in upstate New York. His only memory of Syracuse is of living on a hillside with numerous houses lined closely together.\(^{125}\) When Ben turned three, the Moore’s moved to Clinton, New York, located just outside of Utica. Clinton would be the place where Moore remained during his childhood and where he would ultimately attend college.

Moore attended the area local schools of Clinton for the entirety of his primary education. In school Moore’s favorite subjects, which were influenced by his parents, included music, the visual arts, and the sciences. Both Roger and Joanna were skilled musicians. Roger originally sought to become an art teacher, as a painter, but ultimately left the visual arts behind and became a doctor.\(^{126}\) Ultimately, Moore would seek to follow both of his father’s career paths. Moore’s father owned a private family practice and was often busy. Ben held a close relationship with both parents, but his father’s routine absence resulted in Ben forming a stronger relationship with his mother.\(^{127}\) While both parents were talented musicians, it was the influence of his mother that shaped Moore’s interest in both voice and piano.

When not in school or working his newspaper route as paperboy, Moore surrounded himself with the visual arts and music. At the age of eight, he began taking private piano lessons,

\(^{125}\) Ben Moore, Skype interview by author, March 1, 2016.

\(^{126}\) Ibid.

\(^{127}\) Ibid.
which would continue throughout his high school and college years. Moore described himself as a “crazy overachiever in high school. I did absolutely everything. President of my class and in every group you could possibly imagine and just constantly doing stuff.”128 He also was fond of Biology and Physics. “There’s part of my brain that really enjoys things that are absolute.”129 His extracurricular activities also remained very important to him, consisting of continued piano lessons as well as voice lessons, choral groups, musical theater, acting, and performing.

After graduating from high school, Moore attended Hamilton College in Clinton, New York. During his four years at Hamilton, Moore focused his degrees on the visual arts and sciences. He sought to become a painter and a doctor and pursued courses in the visual arts as well as the pre-med curriculum. While he did not pursue a degree in music, he took additional courses in music theory and music appreciation and was involved in all of Hamilton’s collegiate choral groups. In his final semester, Moore discovered that he had failed organic chemistry, a subject he never liked, even in high school, which prevented him from obtaining a pre-med degree.130 He graduated from Hamilton College with a Bachelor of Arts.131

At the age of 21, instead of immediately trying to retake his failed class, Moore decided to take a break from education and moved to New York City. What originally began as a two-year plan of living in the city turned into three and ultimately six years. While in New York City, Moore pursued an acting career. He auditioned for numerous shows while supplementing his

128 Moore, interview.

129 Ibid.

130 Moore, interview.

income as a waiter, proofreader, and pianist. He played piano and sang at clubs and piano bars, including Broadway Baby, Don’t Tell Mama, and Mrs. J.’s Sacred Cow. He also played in the lobby of the St. Regis Hotel. At the end of six years, questioning his choice of career, he gave up his pursuit of acting and turned again to the visual arts and music. When interviewed about this time in his life, Moore stated,

I should say that through all this period I was…in my head writing music. I was a pianist and I was making up songs. I was putting on them tape, you know like a portable tape recorder, but not taking it really seriously, and it wasn’t until I was twenty-nine when friends of mine who had heard me play extemporaneously and encouraged me to at least take a workshop and pursue composing or writing in some way, shape, or form.\textsuperscript{132}

A boyfriend at the time convinced him to take the idea of composing seriously.

I’m not sure why I didn’t take it seriously but I think it was partly that when I was a music student, I wasn’t as proficient as all my colleagues, because I wasn’t a great pianist. And because of that, I just felt I wasn’t a good enough musician to be a composer. What I didn’t really realize is that I was perfectly fine as a musician; I had everything I needed to be a composer…You don’t really have to be a performer to be a composer.\textsuperscript{133}

Differentiated from his “performances” at clubs and piano bars, Moore was always nervous as a performer and felt he could not be relied upon to present a perfect performance.\textsuperscript{134} These insecurities created a false prejudice in his mind. Moore finally realized, “I think there are some advantages to not being a great musician actually, to be a composer, because making mistakes gives you ideas as well. You mess around at the piano and you’re falling all over the keys, sometimes you make discoveries about the way things should be.”\textsuperscript{135}

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{132} Moore, interview. \\
\textsuperscript{133} Ibid.  \\
\textsuperscript{134} Ibid.  \\
\textsuperscript{135} Ibid. 
\end{flushright}
At the age of twenty-nine, Moore began applying for graduate school in the visual arts. In 1990, he was accepted into the Parson’s School of Design with plans of becoming an art teacher. Two years later he graduated with an MFA in painting. While in graduate school he also pursued composition. His first step was joining the BMI musical theater workshop, which has produced famous “Broadway people” such as the teams behind Avenue Q and Ragtime. After graduating from the Parson’s School of design, Moore sought the mentorship of composer Joshua Rosenblum at Yale. He also took private lessons with composers Eric Ewazen and Lance Horne at Juilliard. His first compositions were in musical theater and cabaret genres. It was not until 2001 that he wrote his first art song, when a friend commissioned him to write a piece.

From the 1990’s through the 2000’s, he juggled careers as a painter and composer. After graduate school, Moore taught the visual arts in continuing education at Marymount Manhattan College. The strongest influences on his own painting style were Matisse, Cézanne, and van Gogh, the latter whom he had loved since he was a child. In 1992 he held his first solo exhibition of oil paintings at the Prince Street Gallery. As his compositions became more popular and his commissions increased, along with the loss of his New York painting studio space, he placed his art career on the “back burner.”


137 Moore, interview.

138 Ibid.

139 Ibid.

140 Moore, “Artist.”

141 Moore, interview.
Moore holds three of his compositions close to him as important achievements. The first is the song cycle *Dear Theo*, for its personal value. The second is his most recent work, *Enemies, A Love Story*, an opera that premiered in February 2016 at Palm Beach Opera.¹⁴² The opera libretto was written by Nahma Sandrow, which is based on the novel by Isaac Bashevis Singer.¹⁴³ Described by Moore as a “monumental feat,” the eight-year process presented challenges for him in writing for full orchestra in a full-length opera.¹⁴⁴ The third composition is his art song *The Lake Isle of Innisfree*, which has the most performances of his works according to ASCAP (American Society of Composers, Authors and Publishers) surveys.¹⁴⁵

Moore’s music is influenced by a number of classical and musical theater composers. As a young boy he particularly remembers listening to *Tristan und Isolde*, by Richard Wagner, especially the pure passion heard in the love duet.¹⁴⁶ In addition to Wagner, early musical influences included Puccini, Verdi, and later, Mozart.¹⁴⁷ The pure melodic writing of musical theater composers heavily influenced him. His cites Richard Rogers and George Gershwin, “…for their ability to write these very pure melodies that some of them I think are just perfect—just so unforgettable and so beautiful and at the same time very simple…and yet they have a real lasting value. Sometimes some great classical composers, you recognize their greatness but they

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¹⁴² Moore, “Composer.”

¹⁴³ Ibid.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid.
may not have the ability to write…that memorable [of a] melody.”¹⁴⁸ Now, as a serious art song composer, Moore views Reynaldo Hahn as someone to emulate because of his beautiful melodies and his ability to successfully blend the classical with more modern elements.¹⁴⁹ He also admires Samuel Barber for his “incredible structure and sophistication.”¹⁵⁰

While Moore’s composing career remains in the foreground over his painting both careers have given him great success. Moore’s paintings have been shown across the United States and Europe including the Mangel Gallery, the Munson Williams Proctor Institute, London’s Wigmore Hall, the Gallery of Graphic Arts, the Ian Peck Gallery, the Shaker Mountain Festival, and the celebrated Elaine Benson Gallery.¹⁵¹ His paintings have also been featured as album artwork for classical performers, published in Time magazine, as well as on the cover for the collection of his published art songs.¹⁵²

Moore’s compositions have risen in popularity due to performances by leading singers at the Metropolitan Opera. Deborah Voigt, Nathan Gunn, Susan Graham, and Lawrence Brownlee have each recorded some of Moore’s art songs on their individual CDs.¹⁵³ In 2006, G. Schirmer published a collection of fourteen of his art songs.¹⁵⁴ In addition, to his art songs Graham and Voigt have also performed some his cabaret songs, notably in the 2006 Metropolitan Opera

¹⁴⁸ Moore, interview.
¹⁴⁹ Ibid.
¹⁵⁰ Ibid.
¹⁵¹ Moore, “Artist.”
¹⁵² Ibid.
¹⁵³ Moore, “Composer.”
¹⁵⁴ Ibid.
Farewell Gala for Joseph Volpe. In the summer of 2015, his youth opera *The Odyssey* premiered at the Glimmerglass Festival. Moore currently lives on the Upper West Side in Manhattan and continues to teach in the visual arts both at the Morgan Library and the Guggenheim Museum in New York City. He and his partner enjoy traveling, hiking in the country, playing with their dog Rosie, and watching television.

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155 Moore, “Composer.”

156 Ibid.

157 Moore, interview.
CHAPTER 3: CREATING DEAR THEO

Understanding the inspiration and process of any composer’s work is essential to the performer. Such knowledge of the background and structure of a work helps to clarify the composer’s intent and may aid in performance. Likewise, this information may inform the performer’s characterization, emotional depth, and musicality. In the case of Ben Moore, understanding the creation of a work is important as his process is unique to each piece. This is especially important for the cycle of Dear Theo, where Moore is responsible not only for the music but also the adaptation of text. Moore writes, “This piece holds a special meaning for me since, as a painter myself, I have been moved and inspired by van Gogh’s work since early childhood.” Yet it was not merely his fascination with the artist that would prove to make his cycle successful. Moore’s life shares certain parallels with van Gogh’s that may have aided in his psychological understanding of the artist and which are vividly displayed in the emotion of the music. Moore himself has persevered through wrestling with personal identity, separating from his parent’s own ideals, and working through the loss of a loved one. Moore states, “To be a good composer, to have something beautiful or interesting to say in your art, there has to be some suffering. Right? There has to be, because that’s when you uncover something deeper inside you.”

158 Moore, interview.
159 Ben Moore, Dear Theo: For Tenor Voice and Piano (Based on letters of Vincent van Gogh to his brother Theo), (n.p.: Ben Moore, 2012), i.
160 Moore, interview.
161 Ibid.
The inspiration for the cycle originated while Moore was vacationing in the Netherlands and visited the Van Gogh Museum in Amsterdam. Recounting the event, Moore writes, “Besides being captivated by the astonishing art on display I was also intrigued by the wall texts.” Placed on the wall next to each painting were selected translated quotations from letters that Vincent had written to his brother Theo. Moore continues, “One quote in particular stayed with me. In it, Vincent, speaking about mortality, expressed his desire to leave some souvenir in the form of drawings or pictures. It's a notion that moved me then and years later became the basis for the final song in the cycle: Souvenir. But at the time it was merely a germ of an idea that I hoped I might utilize someday.” Reflecting on his experience at the museum, Moore suggested he was moved by the fact that van Gogh never knew the impact his paintings would have on the world, and that fame was elusive to the artist who would only selling one painting during his lifetime. After initially pondering the possibility of a song or cycle on van Gogh, Moore put it out of his head for a few years.

While Moore’s process for composition has uniquely different aspects for each piece, he reports he often forgets the compositional process. He does describe a generalized pattern that he follows to start composing a new piece of music. Moore starts with either text or music, the order does not always matter for him. What is important to him is that eventually the text be

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163 Ibid.

164 Ibid.

165 Ibid.
meaningful and have a commentary or subject that he can support personally. Moore believes
the greatest communicator in music is melody and that, whether the text or the melody comes
first, the text must come across through melodic techniques that enhance its message. He
writes, “A melody can be the most transformative conveyor of an emotional idea. So
constructing a melody, while respecting its textual basis can, I believe, get closer to the truth than
a verbatim setting of a translation that may or may not be entirely reliable in any case.” Moore
seeks to remain melodic in his compositions while using the full range of harmonic language
available to him as a modern composer.

Usually his compositions begin with the creation of music first, even if the text has been
preset, as in poetry or prose. “Often times I have a tune somewhere in my head or that I’ve
recorded somewhere that I find that will fit that music.” After the text has been selected,
Moore memorizes, repeats, and “lives with it” in order to let his subconscious work on the text to
foment a spontaneous evolution of primary themes, rather than working them technically.
Moore states, “Once I hit upon some melodic themes that I like and I have the kernel of a song,
then I have to work really diligently on the details.” These details include experimenting with

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166 Moore, “Creation.”
167 Moore, interview.
168 Moore, “Creation.”
169 Moore, interview.
170 Ibid.
171 Ibid.
172 Ibid.
173 Ibid.
keys, harmony, modulations, and structural formats via playing, singing, and recording the music at the piano, piecing it together over a period time. Finally, he takes the music to his computer, using the notational software Sibelius and his electronic keyboard, where he is then able to further experiment with the playback of the sound as well as different key areas. 174

The creation of Dear Theo holds some similarities to the process described above, but the formation of the song cycle is unique in one particular area. After receiving a commission from Robert Cowles, the idea of the letter as a song came back to Moore. “The work actually began as an a cappella choral piece of the same name which I wrote in 2009. That work was commissioned by Robert Cowles of Hobart College and premiered there in 2010.” 175 In the years following that premiere, Moore began working on the song cycle, expanding the themes and some of the melodies from the choral piece, taking the major themes and expanding them into the individual songs of the cycle. 176 Moore writes, “The fact that the song cycle includes piano accompaniment allowed me to create music in which the piano could provide background textures, for example, whereas in the choral work I could make use of vocal counterpoint. For the song cycle I mined many more passages from the Van Gogh correspondence to create a substantially longer work.” 177 He began with the first song, The Red Vineyard, and then followed with the last song, Souvenir, as the final song contains music from the first. 178 He finished the song cycle in 2012 but continued to work on the music until it was recorded for Delos records in

174 Moore, interview.
175 Moore, “Creation.”
176 Moore, interview.
177 Moore, “Creation.”
178 Moore, interview.
2014 by Paul Appleby and Brian Zeger.  

The order of the songs was not finalized until this recording session. Moore says that originally the sixth song, *Already Broken*, was placed early in the song cycle, but the tenor Paul Appleby convinced him to make it the penultimate song because of its sense of finality.

Another important and unique aspect of the entire piece is that Moore did not merely compose the music but also adapted all of the texts used from Vincent’s letters himself without the help of a librettist or lyricist. After first being inspired and later upon commission, Moore turned to Mark Roskill’s book *The Letters of Vincent van Gogh*, which includes a memoir on Vincent’s life, by his sister-in-law J. van Gogh-Bonger, as well as select translated letters from Vincent to his brother. Because Constable & Co. first published the translations in another book in 1927, which exists in the Public Domain, Moore was able to use the texts he desired.

Selecting and adapting the text was a detailed process for Moore. He would underline major themes he found in the letters as he read them and after finding “potent phrases,” would repeat them to himself. Next he would read the whole letter and try to determine the main “thrust,” selecting passages that would summarize the letter while providing a window into van Gogh’s emotions. Moore states:

…it’s hard to find a passage that summarizes a whole letter. So that’s where I took liberties to add some phrases, modify some phrases, so that it would express the feeling of a whole letter as opposed to just a small bit. And I think through the

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179 Moore, interview.
180 Ibid.
181 Moore, “Creation.”
182 Moore, interview.
183 Ibid.
music and the text the way I’ve adapted it that it conveys a lot of what is thousands of pages of letters in a very short space of time. And I think it shows this emotional arch that I discovered in the letters.\textsuperscript{184}

Moore wanted to remain true to the original texts and change as little as possible but he qualifies certain liberties taken by referencing the “gap” between the original French and Dutch language to the translations as well as with his concerns of securing the “zeitgeist” of a letter and condensing it into smaller forms that showed the poignancy and struggles of van Gogh through emotional highlights.\textsuperscript{185} Besides, the goals mentioned above, Moore would change or alter text for two main reasons: for incorporation with rhythm and melody or for additional clarity. For example, in \textit{The Man I Have to Paint}, the text was selected verbatim and Moore crafted the shape and rhythm of the melody around the text.\textsuperscript{186} In the song \textit{Souvenir}, Moore came up with a melody for the mood of the text and adapted it to fit his music.\textsuperscript{187}

Appendix D is a document created by Moore after he finished adapting the texts and composing the cycle. Providing both the final song texts as well as notated texts with brackets where adaptations occur, it reveals Moore’s adaptation research and process. He also footnotes the original date of the letter and its location within Roskill’s book. The footnotes also provide original translations of words and passages in which the text was altered, as well as quotations where Moore ultimately created his own text based on the ideas present in specific passages of letters.

\textsuperscript{184} Moore, interview.
\textsuperscript{185} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{186} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{187} Ibid.
The text found in song one is drawn from three letters and the selected passages from each are almost verbatim. Moore’s adaptation for the song adds words for text clarity. In songs two through four, the word for word approach is altered only by a small selection of words retranslated by Moore. Songs five through seven each take their texts from three or more letters with songs six and seven containing adaptations that are more complex. For example, part of the text from *Already Broken* is taken from a passage where Vincent writes, “It is true that I am often in the greatest misery, but still there is within me a calm pure harmony and music. In the poorest huts, in the dirtiest corner, I see drawings and pictures.” Moore distills the text and chooses words that offer the same emotion in a more gripping way, writing, “It's true I'm often sick and troubled. But there is harmony inside of me. For in the poorest little hut I see a picture…”

Moore views the cycle as a stream of consciousness rather than a journey. A journey implies chronology to Moore but the cycle presents focal points that summarize the man and his letters. Because of this, Moore does not take issue with singers excerpting specific songs from the song cycle in performance. Likewise, he is agreeable to singers transposing keys to facilitate ease of technique while maintaining the drama and pathos of the music. However, Moore does say that the songs sung in context work much better and certain songs, specifically *When I'm at Work*, do not work well or make sense outside of the confines of the cycle.

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188 Roskill, 156.

189 Moore, *Dear Theo*.

190 Moore, interview.

191 Ibid.
The music of the cycle matches the style of Moore’s other serious compositions, especially his published collection of art songs and additional song cycles. Dear Theo is the first of two cycles utilizing written prose for the text. The other is a song cycle for two voices based on texts from correspondence between John and Abigail Addams, which is anticipated to premier within the next year.192 Dear Theo differs from Moore’s other cycles, So Free Am I and Ode to a Nightingale, because the text is drawn from numerous selections, whereas the other cycles utilize one selection of set text.

Moore’s use and selection of texts is an important aspect of his music. Delos Records writes, “Ben Moore is a particularly eloquent exponent of the art song, noted for the broad and eclectic variety of his thematic applications and poetic sources.”193 His melodies are soaring and lyrical, creating immediate emotional impact for listeners. This lyricism is linked with affecting texts that are full of drama and powerful messages. The New York Times wrote, “[Ben Moore is] an American songwriter with a knack for matching texts to lyrically generous, harmonically rich music.”194 Moore’s harmonic language is modern yet approachable. Even the dissonant harmonies have a purpose and overall aesthetic quality. Opera News in reviewing Dear Theo, wrote, “[The song cycle] displays composer Ben Moore’s aptitude for psychologically probing yet undeniably appealing storytelling.”195 When asking Moore about his musical style, he stated:

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192 Moore, interview.


194 Ibid.

A lot of people say that a lot of my music has a sadness that’s kind of built into it. But I like to think that there is a catharsis in it, you know, that in this cycle for instance, every song you can feel the pain that this man has gone through, but through music, music has this transcendence to it. So I hope people take away that it’s worth it. It’s worth the struggles. And when you have an avenue to express yourself, that makes life worth living. And when you share it with other people, what could be better?¹⁹⁶

Indeed, the eleven years it took Moore to adapt text and compose this song cycle were full of detailed planning and intuitive passion that results in a powerful musical catharsis of a broken yet loving artist.

¹⁹⁶ Moore, interview.
CHAPTER 4:
PERFORMING DEAR THEO

The Red Vineyard

The texts for The Red Vineyard are taken from two letters written in April and November of 1888. These are both from the time when Vincent lived in the Yellow House at Arles with Gauguin. It was an exciting time for Vincent with both the camaraderie and mentorship of another painter as well as the beautiful landscapes and productive outflow of paintings. Near the opening of the letter from early November 1888, Vincent mentions his work on a painting of a purple and yellow vineyard, which would become The Red Vineyard (Figure 4.1). He then talks about his daily routine and recent interactions with Gauguin. 197 At the end of the letter he again excitedly mentions the vineyard wishing Theo had been there to see its colorful beauty after the

Figure 4.1. The Red Vineyard, November 1888 198

197 Roskill, 298.

rain.\textsuperscript{199} The second half of the song’s text is found in a letter from April of the same year, soon after his move to Arles and before Gauguin arrived. He describes the idea for the painting of the \textit{Starry Night} (Figure 1.4) based on the entrancing night skies he had seen in his short time there.\textsuperscript{200} While he expresses his enthusiasm for the conception of the painting, he would not paint until his time at the asylum in Saint-Rémy. The texts from these two letters serve as a useful introduction to the song cycle and the writer behind it. They help to depict Vincent at the peak of his career and introduce him as a painter. The texts show his undying passion for art and the beauty he observed around him. They also hint at his creative process.

The hopeful and positive outlook presented in the letters serve as useful introduction for the man and provide a starting point for an audience to be moved by more poignant and tragic texts later. This prefatory tone is present in the first five measures of the song. The opening chords in the accompaniment, with musical indications of crescendo, tenuto, and diminuendo, should reflect the inflection of the text in the vocal line, with the stress falling on “The-” and “bro-” of “Dear Theo my brother…” in m. 2-4 (Figure 4.2). The fermatas present along with the instruction of “Freely” above the opening vocal line allow the singer to portray the opening phrase as if Vincent is speaking aloud his opening remarks with dramatic “beats” or pauses written into the music. In the accompaniment, mm. 1-11 should be characteristic of the playing of a hymn. The relatively chordal structure, especially in the opening measures, along with the predominantly stepwise melodic line in mm. 6-11, help to establish the mood of a hymn. Moore states, “I was thinking about making [it] kind of like a hymn because he was a religious

\textsuperscript{199} Roskill, 300.

\textsuperscript{200} Ibid., 265.
man, and then he…shifted away from religion and he became religious about his art.\textsuperscript{201}

Following the opening hymn-like section the rhythms and texture begin to expand as Vincent begins to describe the colors of the scene. This is intensified by the crescendo and accelerando in mm.12-13 as if the changing from red to yellow is happening in real time. Moore chooses different harmonies in the accompaniment for each of the colors in an attempt to depict the feeling of each color, musically. For example, Moore matches the brightness of the color yellow in m. 14 by utilizing an E-major chord combined with an ascending leap in the voice from B\textsubscript{3} to G\textsubscript{5}\textsuperscript{b} (Figure 4.3). The singer should pay special attention to these harmonies and quite literally color the words through timbre and vowel quality to match the shade evoked by the harmony.

\textsuperscript{201} Moore, interview.
Moore depicts the growing excitement that builds from Vincent’s description of color in the scene through his use of triplets (Figure 4.4). The rhythmic motive remains constant beginning in m. 20 and continues through m. 26. Moore doubles the figure, changing it from eighth note to sixteenth note triplets starting in m. 24. This creates a unique texture that further heightens the enthusiasm. Moore states, “I tried to find figures that… sort of echo this idea of his ever-bubbling passion underneath the surface.” He also adds tension by providing the element of two against three through the use of steady eighth note motion in the bass. This added tension hints at the temperamental qualities of Vincent’s behavior. Moore marks the climax of the phrase in m. 25 as “(ecstatic)” and meant it to be an acting suggestion as well as indicator of his underlying intention to portray this section as a spiritual experience (Figure 4.4).

Consequently, despite the ascent through the passaggio, the singer should strive to honor Moore’s marking by remaining free of tension both in vocal tone and facial expression. (It

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202 Moore, interview.

203 Ibid.
should be noted that the fermatas marked in the vocal line and bass of the piano should also be observed in the treble.\textsuperscript{204}

The following section marks a change in tone and emotion. The fermatas in mm. 27-28 (Figure 4.4) provide needed space for the next section. The singer sighs through the descending major seventh interval. The silence that follows is filled with the “spirituality” of the moment, which overwhelms the character and allows the singer and audience to ponder the moment. The “\textit{long pause...}” in m. 28 helps to establish this new section psychologically, as well as

\textsuperscript{204} Moore, interview.
identifying it as a separate idea from a separate letter. As Vincent begins to describe the idea for the scene of his famous painting *Starry Night*, Moore provides the singer with a homophonic texture in the accompaniment in mm. 29-35 and writes “With Hushed Intensity” above the vocal line in addition to “*(freely).*” This again evokes the quality of the hymn and it is as if the famous painting is given extreme reverence. The “hushed intensity” also allows the singer to portray the aspect of wonderment in Vincent’s personality through vocal tone, highlighted by the twinkling stars, which are represented in the F♯ octave in m. 30 (Figure 4.5).

![Figure 4.5. “With Hushed Intensity” and “starry night” text painting, mm. 29-30](image)

After the crescendo in mm. 32-35, Moore reintroduces the triplets in m. 36. This time the triplets exist in both staves of the accompaniment. The treble triplets are melodic rather than merely a textural or harmonic element. Additionally, the syncopated triplets in the bass provide a rhythmic impulse that is constantly moving forward. In actuality, mm. 36-46 should be one long continuous crescendo with the tempo consistently accelerating until the climax at the start of the

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205 Moore, interview.
motive in m. 46, which are easily seen in the dynamic and tempo markings throughout these measures. The only moment of slight repose lies in the end of m. 38 where the singer should not feel rushed to breathe. Looking beyond this first song to the shape of the cycle, the theme beginning in mm. 46 is important as it later returns in the last song, *Souvenir* (Figure 4.6).

Figure 4.6. Motive that returns in *Souvenir*, mm. 46-47.

The singer should exhibit a lyrical quality and maintain legato throughout this section despite the larger leaps, melismatic passages, and rhythmically active accompaniment. Each reiteration of repeated text should engage differing vocal qualities which display alternative meanings or emotions of the same text. For example, “such wonderful nights” of m. 36 could be colored with awe followed by the reiteration in m. 37 with contentment, moving to passion in m. 38, building excitement in m. 40, and leading to the climax in m. 46. Correspondingly, the singer should use a lighter mechanism, even when the vocal line moves lower to facilitate an easy and beautiful tone.

Following the climactic section, Moore writes a recitative-like section in mm. 48-56. Over a texture of chords and triplets, Moore indicates “piano repeats triplets as necessary, voice enters at will very freely...” (Figure 4.7). Vincent has returned from his spiritual experience and therefore the singer should allow the declamatory nature of the text to lead these measures as
Figure 4.7. Recitative-like section, mm. 48-50

in the introduction of the song. As the singer finishes m. 51, the pianist should end the “ad lib.”
of triplets and move in tempo to m. 52. Additionally, the pianist should not rush moving from m. 53 to m. 54. The poignant postlude in m. 54 harkens back to the opening of the songs and should hint at the underlying troubles of the artist despite the excitement and passion just experienced. Contrastingly, the voice should end the song full of hope and with an almost spoken tone as the letter and song come to an end.

I Found a Woman

The text used for this song comes from a rather lengthy letter in December of 1881. In it, Vincent describes to Theo his time with the painter Anton Mauve and the criticisms he received from him. He then goes into detail about his relationship with Kee Vos and the drama surrounding the end of their relationship. Vincent then proceeds to tell Theo of the new woman he has found namely, the prostitute Sien. While describing their interactions, he boldly claims that he does not pass condemnation on her or on others of that profession. He also suggests his actions are sinless asking how love could be a sin. He essentially implores Theo to remain open-

\footnote{206 Roskill, 131-144.}
minded regarding the situation and to continue supporting him, as he knows Theo has engaged in similar dalliances.

Moore conveys this imploring tone as well as Vincent’s recent pain in the music. The musical indication of “throbbing” is conveyed through the dynamics and articulation of the opening measures. The crescendos which lead to the tenuto and are followed by diminuendos achieve the throbbing nature Moore desires by creating a wave-like quality that evokes a certain pang of emotion (Figure 4.8). Following the introduction, Moore thins the texture providing only

![Figure 4.8. “Throbbing” introduction, mm. 1-5](image)

chords in the accompaniment as the singer enters. Reminiscent of aspects found in *The Red Vineyard*, Moore designates “Speech rhythm, intense…” over the singer’s entrance. This intensity should be inflected through the diction and should be declamatory in nature, as in a dramatic monologue. Moore’s skillful placement of rests interrupts the possibility of a legato vocal line. Throughout the opening monologue, Moore supplies musical motives or interjections as psychological commentary supplementing the text (Figure 4.9). For example, in m. 6 beat 4, Moore composes fragile flourish following “woman.” The same technique, parallel
Figure 4.9. Commentary from accompaniment, mm. 6-8
to the text painting following “starry night” in song one, is seen on the final beat of the measure
with a passionate motive that leads to the emotional outpouring of “But oh this woman.” Finally,
the dissonant motive in m. 10 suggests a musical irony and foreshadows the relationship’s
ultimate failure. It is important for the singer to infuse this dramatic arch by placing weight on
specific notes and words, for example emphasizing the word “oh” in m. 8 and “charm” in m. 9,
as well as the dissonant $E^\#$ on the word “she” of the same measure.

The subsequent musical section becomes increasingly lyrical as Vincent moves away
from merely describing Sien to reminiscing on past relationships. Subsequently, the vocal line
should become more connected and legato throughout, contrasting the opening section. The
singer should carefully observe Moore’s articulations, including the breath mark in m. 12, the
tenutos in mm. 13-14, and the accent in m. 16, which provide crucial dramatic beats for
interpreting the text. Moore’s use of seventh chords in m.15-16 warmly shade the words
“affection” and “love.” Moore changes colors again in m. 18-21 with Vincent’s emotional
outburst (Figure 4.10). The change of harmony and meter help to accentuate the word “damned.”
Further, the crescendo in both the piano and voice should build to an emotional outburst. Moore
Figure 4.10. Vincent’s emotional outburst, mm. 18-21

notes that often people will keep this softer but that a louder eruption is more appropriate as indicated by his crescendo in m. 18.\textsuperscript{207} This crescendo could extend to \textit{forte} before the diminuendo in m. 21.

Immediately following the outburst, Moore quickly changes the mood, making it more introspective and piteous as Vincent rhetorically asks if he is not also deserving of love. The arpeggiation of the accompaniment sets this section apart, giving it a transfixed and dream-like quality (Figure 4.11). As a suggestion, the singer could interpret the text of m. 21-23 as if Vincent is taken aback. The second iteration of text could be delivered with a renewed

Figure 4.11. Arpeggiation in accompaniment, mm. 22-24

\textsuperscript{207} Moore, interview.
fervor and doubt in m. 23-25 that aids the crescendo and returns passionately to the account of meeting with Sien. Just as in the beginning, mm. 25-30 should be text-driven and emphasize inflection of the words with diction evocative of the underlying emotion. Emphasis should be placed on the words “misery” and “everything” to add further impact. Accordingly, Moore marks the first “everything” with an accent; the final iteration of the word should seek to replicate the same stress in a hopeless and almost spoken manner. This allows for the concluding statement of the piano to be more telling. Like all of Vincent’s relationships, Moore leaves the ending unresolved by presenting a chord without the third of a triad, leaving its quality ambiguous.

**Little One**

The text for this song comes from one of Vincent’s final letters before his death in July 1890. Now living in Auvers under the care of Dr. Gachet, Vincent had just returned from a visit with Theo and his wife in Paris where he had seen their son Vincent. He speaks of the continual weight his mental illness has on him and that he is in “toil and trouble.” Just before ending the letter, Vincent mentions how often he thinks of his nephew and how the desire for children has gone but “the mental suffering from it remains.”

Moore eloquently captures this sentiment in the simplistic yet haunting lullaby of this third song. The song is minimalistic compared to most others in the cycle. It begins simply with an octave and continues in the key of C major. The 6/8 time signature along with the sparse texture, simplistic harmony, and delicate dynamic markings help to instill the feeling of a lullaby (Figure 4.12). In the opening line, Moore incorporates subtle dissonances in m. 3 and m. 5 that

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208 Roskill, 338.
Figure 4.12. Opening measures of *Little One*, mm. 1-5
quickly resolve by half step. This provides a psychological commentary on the pain still hidden
deep within Vincent over not having a family of his own.

Throughout the text of this song, Vincent’s thoughts alternate between his love for his
nephew and Theo, and his own emotional pain. For example in the opening nine measures, mm.
1-5 reference his nephew while mm. 6-9 become more introspective. This pattern continues with
mm.10-11 juxtaposed against mm.12-15 and mm.16-19 with mm. 20-30. Moore captures this in
the music through crescendos that build to the high point yet shockingly change in character at
the zenith, producing a feeling of fragility and marking a new change in thought. The most
prominent example of this in mm.14-15 (Figure 4.13) where both voice and piano crescendo in

Figure 4.13. Example of unrealized crescendo, mm. 14-15
tessitura as Vincent’s remorse builds in the phrase “too old to desire something else.” At the peak of both the crescendo and melodic line, Moore immediately changes the dynamic as well as the mood, paralleling Vincent’s own habit of impulsivity. In this specific instance, a floating head quality of *voix mixte* should be used to achieve this change; the result is both beautiful and haunting. The singer should make these changes *subito* for increased dramatic effect. If done properly, the final crescendo, which is finally realized and reaches its dynamic and melodic peak in mm.25-26 (Figure 4.14), will be more satisfying to the listener because the musical satisfaction is reached simultaneously with the antithesis of his pain. The final word should have the feeling of a plaintive whisper within the disturbing chromaticism of the postlude, which seems to resolve just before the final chord dismisses the idea with its indelible concluding dissonance.

![Figure 4.14. Emotional climax realized, mm. 25-27](image)

The fourth song contains text that is drawn almost verbatim from a letter dated August 1888. The letter begins with Vincent describing paintings he has done with a comment about how he is moving away from the ideas of impressionism he gained in Paris. He then describes
how he would like to paint a picture of a friend in order to show his appreciation of him. The man was Eugène Boch, a fellow painter, and his portrait Vincent entitled *The Poet* (Figure 4.15). Vincent describes the painting in great detail with information about why he chooses the specific colors he uses. Vincent writes,

> But the picture is not finished yet. To finish it I am now going to be the arbitrary colorist. I exaggerate the fairness of the hair, I get to orange tones, chromes and pale lemon yellow. Beyond the head, instead of painting the ordinary wall of the mean room, I paint infinity, a plain background of the richest, intensest [sic] blue that I can contrive, and by this simple combination the bright head illuminated against a rich blue background acquires a mysterious effect, like a star in the depths of an azure sky.

The passage quoted above precedes Vincent’s description of the painting that is included in the

![Image of The Poet](image)

**Figure 4.15. The Poet, 1888**

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209 Roskill, 277.

210 Ibid., 277-278.

song’s text. The entire letter is a unique window into Vincent’s process involving color and the symbolism it holds. The text also depicts his volatile temper with the sarcasm of the phrase “…and the nice people will only see the exaggeration as caricature.”  It also uncovers the fact that Vincent was not oblivious to people’s thoughts about his art or personality. The text that ends the song provides insight into his frustrations with money as well as his overpowering desire to paint at all costs, despite what others think.

Moore expresses Vincent’s excitement and determination, as well as the scintillating colors of the painting, in the frenetic energy of the music. The first indication in the score is “Rolling, intense” as well as the metric marking of $ \text{\textfrac{\text{\textquarter}}{\text{\textfour}}} = 120$, making this the fastest and most animated song of the cycle. The rhythms are rapid with the most prominent feature of the song consisting of Moore’s constant use of the undentuplet or the grouping of eleven notes into a tuplet, as in a triplet. Figure 4.16 indicates the different patterns of groupings demonstrated through the song. Each hand of the accompaniment has two separate patterns of undentuplets. The first pattern as seen in m.1 continues upward in tessitura while the second pattern in m. 2 stays within the range of an octave. Likewise, the treble pattern, displayed in m.1-2 is more of a chordal arpeggiation while the second pattern consists of altering between the root, fifth, and octave of a chord, as in m.4-5. On top of the tumult of the accompaniment, the lyrical melodic line dominates. The line begins fairly simply with overall stepwise motion or leaps of only fourths or fifths until m. 9. Beginning in m. 9 and continuing through m. 18, the vocal line become more acrobatic with consistent leaps of fifths and sevenths. Despite these large leaps, the singer should remain legato over the undulating rhythms of the accompaniment.

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212 Roskill, 278.

213 Moore, interview.
Moore also uses text painting in this section to accentuate the words. For example, on the word south, the vocal line descends the leap of a seventh (Figure 4.17). Following the words “storm flashes” in m. 13, Moore creates a musical bolt of lightning with an ascending motive and accents (Figure 4.18). He then uses the same chord in m. 14 to echo the previous measure but this time highlighting the word “iron” as if the chord following is the blacksmith’s strike of the anvil. Finally, the perfect fourths on the bottom of the chords in m.15 create a bright timbre that underscores the “luminous tones” (Figure. 4.19).
Figure 4.17. Text painting on south, mm. 8-9

Figure 4.18. Text painting in mm. 13-14

Figure 4.19. Text-painting with perfect fourths, m. 15
The second half of the song is predominantly recitative-like. In m. 21 (Figure 4.20), Moore writes an E♭ major seventh chord with an added fourth and trill in the bass, which essentially stops time, with the rolling rhythmic figure now frozen into a single chord. This again allows Moore to differentiate between the psychological sections of the text. Moore indicates for the voice to enter “freely” and “at will” over the trill and held chords in the accompaniment. Harmonically, chromaticism and dissonances permeate the second half of the song. The voice often ascends chromatically creating dissonance with the harmonies in the accompaniment. For example, the vocal line moves to C4 in m. 25 juxtaposed against the B♭ and C♯ in the bass of the accompaniment (Figure 4.21). Again in m. 30 the accompaniment tremolos on an A♯, D♯, and G while the voice sings an A, D, and B. Also characteristic of this section is the changing meters. In mm. 21-38, Moore changes meters nine times, utilizing the time signatures 2/4, 3/4, 4/4, and 5/4, to give freedom to the singer to inflect the text as if speaking. This phrase shape is further indicated by Moore’s change of harmonies in the accompaniment, moving to new chords on important words or strong beats of the musical phrase. Additionally, due to the subdued dynamics and minimal texture of this section, the voice should deliver the text almost in

![Figure 4.20. Opening of the recitative-like section, mm. 21-22](image-url)
Figure 4.21. Example of dissonance between the voice and piano, m. 25

*parlando*, especially on words such as “ruinous,” “nothing,” and “never” in mm. 34, 35, and 37 respectively. Such assertiveness will aid in leading back into the final codetta where the undentuplets return. While the roar of the accompaniment returns in m. 38, Moore allows the singer to deliver the last section again with a feeling of *parlando* and freely above the texture of the piano (Figure 4.22). Because the tessitura is lower for both piano and voice, the pianist should be cautious of overpowering the voice while the singer should attempt to find a more pointed resonance without portraying a sense of anger or harshness. The feeling of the final section should be as if it is continually accelerating as in a whirlwind to the final accented chord.

Interestingly, this is the only song in the cycle that specifically references connection to another song. Moore indicates that there should be a “*fast segue to next song.*” This further illustrates Moore’s conception of the work as a whole being a stream of consciousness. It also helps to connect the songs, as they are the most tonally ambiguous songs in the cycle. They also
serve as transitions for Moore. Finally, the quick segue into the next song helps to introduce the mental instability and unsettling psychological portrayal.

Figure 4.22. Codetta section, mm. 38-42

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214 Moore, interview.
When I’m at Work

In the score, Moore notes that the texts adapted in this fifth song are from “various letters.” Drawing from selections of four separate letters, the texts from When I’m at Work are presented chronologically within the song, quoting from letters dated July 1883, December 1885, December 1888, and February 1889. The first letter was written while Vincent was still living with Sien, a few months before Theo’s visit during which he persuaded his brother to leave her. The second letter expresses the sentiment “poverty is at my back” written while Vincent was studying painting in Antwerp just before he moved to Paris to live with Theo. The third letter is from his time at Arles with Gaugin in the Yellow House, when he wrote of their frequent arguments and shortly after this letter, Vincent cut off his earlobe. The final letter mentions his “delirium” and was written around the time of one of his mental attacks, shortly before he would admit himself to the asylum in Saint-Rémy. While the themes of the entire cycle can be associated with the entirety of Vincent’s life, the texts utilized in this song are more generic and provide a broader look at Vincent’s mental state throughout his life.

Moore immediately sets up the atmosphere of Vincent’s mental illness through his use of atonality. The first two measures of the accompaniment contain each of the twelve chromatic notes in a scale, which is then repeated in a different pattern in mm. 4-5 (Figure 4.23). The atmosphere of instability is aided by the swift segue from the song before, as well as the dissonant entrance of the voice and piano. The bass of the accompaniment holds an F against the F♯ of the treble and vocal line. The repeated F♯ along with the marking “very freely” and parlando delivery of the text further support the idea of incoherence.

215 Roskill, 250.

216 Ibid., 311.
As seen in the opening measures, the song alternates between settings created by piano interlude followed by recitative-like vocal lines uttered over held notes in the accompaniment. The piano passages should have a feeling of pressing forward in a chaotic frenzy of emotions, which are indicated with “accel.,” that thrust the listener into the next psychological idea presented by the singer. Only in moments of emotional outburst, as in mm. 12-13 with Vincent’s reference to arguments, do the voice and piano join collaboratively (Figure 4.24). Moore again utilizes repeated notes in m.14 to paint the “delirium” mentioned in the text followed by a final emotional outburst in mm. 16-18. Moore concludes the song with an atonal interlude followed by the singer’s final haunting iterations of “I’m still at work” (Figure 4.25).
This song presents several challenges for the singer, emotionally and musically, and is perhaps the most difficult in the cycle. It is important that the singer remember the tonality or final note of a previous section to locate the first note of the following phrase. It is suggested that singer create “centers” of tonality to provide a reference point in singing with accurate pitches. As an example, it may be helpful to perceive of F♯ as the tonal center of the first page in order to facilitate complicated intervals such as in m. 6 (Figures 4.23 and 4.26). Despite the difficulty, the success of the song’s message and effect upon the audience lies solely in the hand of the singer. Because of its atonality, it’s approachability for an untrained audience member is reliant upon the musical and theatrical elements of the singer’s performance. As in other instances throughout the cycle which are marked “freely,” the emphasis should be upon the spoken lilt of the text. For example, the singer should make distinct differences between the softer introspective portions that suddenly erupt into the more resonant outbursts, which emulate shouting, as in m. 13. Additionally, the singer must make bold dramatic choices portraying Vincent’s mental illness, using facial expressions that display emotions such as sadness, anger,
and confusion. The sympathy of the audience must be cultivated before the latter emotional songs of the cycle so that the pathos for the unsettling aspects of mental illness is prepared.

Figure 4.25 Ending of *When I’m at Work*, mm. 17-21

Figure 4.26. Example of using F♯ as tonal center, m. 6
Already Broken

Part of the text of this sixth song is taken from one of the few letters written to Theo while Vincent was in Paris in 1887. Because the brother’s lived together, there is not much correspondence from this time. The thirty-five year old Vincent mentions his diminishing interest in marriage and children and expresses that he feels old and broken. He writes, “To succeed one must have ambition, and ambition seems to me absurd.”217 Ironically, he also suggests that he does not have enough passion for painting to be a painter. The second half of the text is taken from July of 1882. This is written when he was still with Sien in The Hague. He encloses a sketch to Theo of the baby’s cradle and writes of his recent hospitalization due to bladder issues and insomnia.218 This letter was also written shortly after he drew Sorrow. In it, Vincent expresses his self-awareness of people’s opinions of his personality. He writes, “What am I in the eyes of most people? –a nobody, or an eccentric and disagreeable man—somebody who has no position in society and never will have, in short, the lowest of the low. Very well, even if that were true, then I should want to show by my work what there is in the heart of such an eccentric man, of such a nobody.”219 After this passage is quoted, he suggests that he is often distressed but sees drawings and pictures in everything.220

In Already Broken, Moore successfully depicts a depressed man who is determined to remain hopeful of the future, with nothing else to hold onto. The song begins with the marking “Pulsating” referring to the melodic line in the accompaniment which should come to the

217 Roskill, 259.
218 Ibid., 155.
219 Ibid., 156.
220 Ibid., 156.
foreground in view of Moore’s parenthetical statement “(bring out slurred voice in piano...).”
Right from the beginning, Moore musically depicts the idea of brokenness in multiple ways.
First, the very nature of the melody found in the accompaniment is broken (Figure 4.27). The
“pulsating” occurs as indicated with the tenutos, by placing emphases on the suspensions (non
chord tones) present in the melody. Even the melodic line is broken up with interruptions of
repeated tones and miniature phrases, which combine to make up the entire melodic phrase of
mm. 1-2. Second, the idea of brokenness is represented in the bass of the accompaniment with
arpeggiation of broken chords. Third, Moore conveys brokenness in the melody of the vocal

![Figure 4.27 Pulsating melody, broken chords, and intervals of sixths and sevenths, mm.1-7](image)
line. The rhythm is syncopated in comparison to the accompaniment and he establishes a pattern by beginning the first two phrases with the interval of sixth which he then breaks on the third phrase in m. 7 by ascending a seventh, instead of a sixth (Figure 4.27). The interval of the seventh pervades the vocal line and because if falls short of the consonant octave, reinforces the broken aspect. The singer should keep the leaps of the sixth and seventh supported and legato at all times, which will add to the yearning and plaintive quality of melody and text.

Moore demonstrates that Vincent still has hope by the use of major harmonies, yet quickly dispatches them to sustain the tension. For example, in m. 11, Moore harmonizes the text “But I can see a time that’s just on the horizon…” with C major, G major-minor seven, A major, and A major-minor seven (Figure 4.28). This quickly turns minor just following “a time when you might show my pictures with no shame…”, creating additional irony and pathos. A paralleled idea is found in m. 22-23 bringing hope through E major chords on “soon, yes very soon dear brother” but changes to minor chords with added dissonant seconds, in the subsequent text (Figure 4.29). The climax consists of the constant attack of G♯4 in the vocal line that

![Musical notation](image.png)

Figure 4.28. Major versus minor chords used with the text, mm. 11-13
Figure 4.29. Parallel usage of major and minor chords with text, mm. 21-23
descends to the F♯3 and immediately ascends back to the G♯ (Figure 4.30). The result is heart wrenching. It is as if Vincent is determined to fight against the odds, represented in the accompaniment with dissonant tritons and the ominous pedal F♯, to finally make a success of his broken life. The singer should remain in the higher register of the voice even when descending to the lower accented F♯, for ease of returning to the G♯, as well as to maintain enough resonance and support for the continuous powerful high notes. Again, an idea of brokenness is conveyed in this leap, which has risen in intensity to more than an octave.

Figure 4.30. Climactic passage of *Already Broken*, mm. 24-26
As if now completely broken, Moore indicates in the score, “Slow, deliberate” (Figure 4.31). The melody now presented in a high tessitura, displays fragility before the deafening blow of the low E in the bass of the accompaniment as if forever sealing Vincent’s fate. The final phrase should be practically spoken by the singer, with the final “broken” devoid of life as the accompaniment rises to its unresolved ending.

Figure 4.31. Ending of *Already Broken*, mm. 30-33

**Souvenir**

The seventh and final song of the cycle is the only other song, aside from *When I’m at Work*, to use text from more than one or two letters. The first letter is from August of 1883 and contains the text that fostered Moore’s inspiration for the cycle. In it, Vincent expresses the desire to leave a souvenir for the world in drawings and pictures, suggesting that it is his duty to
the world after living in it for thirty years. The second text is adapted from a letter dated July 1882 in which Vincent states he merely wants to reach people with eyes to see his art. The third passage comes from a letter near the end of his life in September 1889 during his time at the asylum in Saint-Rémy. He writes that his strength is depleted and he needs a different nature to be able to succeed in art. The irony of the emotion in these texts is that in a few months Vincent would sell his first painting, and shortly thereafter commit suicide, never knowing the impact his paintings would exert on the world.

Moore begins this emotional song with a poignant beginning of three stark chords, each with their own character (Figure 4.32). When interviewed, Moore stated that the first three measures were added later both to provide an introduction and create additional tension. The dissonance and tessitura of the introduction immediately engages the listener by creating a melancholic beginning frozen in time that perfectly sets up the emotion of the text about to be shared. One performance suggestion is for the singer to display a sense of foreshadowing, as if Vincent knows that he is about to die, thereby forcing the audience deeper into the emotional irony. As the voice enters, Moore marks “Tenderly” above the vocal line as well as the dynamic of “mp” with “pp” and “colla voce…” in the accompaniment. The opening motive should be sung with the utmost delicacy and with an element of freedom this is quietly sustained in both tone and expression. The most important aspect is the delivery of the text. It should be simply stated without excessive shaping, allowing the emotion of the text and the innate shape of the melody to provide the opening statement of the song. This sets up the interlude in mm.10-11

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221 Roskill, 202.

222 Ibid., 156.

223 Moore, interview.
Figure 4.32. The introduction and opening theme from *Souvenir*, mm. 1-9

(Figure 4.33), which is in sharp contrast to the voice’s opening measures. It becomes much more dissonant and is significantly less legato as indicated in the “*(no pedal).*” The dissonance and louder volume should provide further tension in the personality and Vincent and the foreshadowing of his death.

The restatement of the theme beginning in mm. 13 (Figure 4.34) should be sung with more resolve as indicated by Moore’s text above the vocal line: “With Lyrical Sweep...”. The accompaniment has also risen in dynamic and warmed in harmony with a fuller texture. The phrase should be sung with more sense of vocal line and shape that leads to a slight climax, aided
Figure 4.33. Final measure of opening theme and piano interlude, mm. 10-12

Figure 4.34. Restatement of theme, mm.13-19
by the *accelerando*, in m. 19, only to be suddenly declined with the “*p*” that should be sung *subito* on “this man” in m. 20. The rest of the vocal line should be floated and sung as simply and sweetly as possible, using the dramatic beats Moore has written into the music through his placement of fermatas and rests. The singer should take time to let the audience feel the depth of Vincent’s emotions.

The following section, mm. 22-34, acts as a bridge to the next section, “Slowly building…” both in tempo and dynamic. This section begins with a persistent eighth-note motion in the accompaniment. The accompaniment also doubles the melody of the vocal line, while maintaining the eighth note motion as a counterpoint to the voices syncopated rhythms, thus adding tension and forward drive, as seen in the example of Figure 4.35. The repeated texts should have more import in every reiteration. The bridge reaches its climax in mm. 33-34 through Vincent’s determined resolve which is represented in the repeated text of “there is a chance for something more” and which leads to final section of the song. At the climax, Moore writes, “With Passion…” and repeats the motive from *The Red Vineyard* (Figures 4.6 and 4.36). The music and text in mm. 37-42 is a restatement from the first song, but this time in a new key

![Figure 4.35. Example measures of the “bridge” section, mm. 22-25](image)

79
Figure 4.36 End of the bridge into the climax and restatement of *The Red Vineyard*, mm. 33-36 and with a fuller texture in the accompaniment. Moore restates the music and text from the bridge in mm. 42-43 before arriving at a larger climax on the word “more” (Figure 4.37). Here, Moore combines the ideas of the “souvenir theme” with musical elements from *The Red Vineyard* by superimposing the melody of this song over the triplet texture from the first song. This statement of the “souvenir theme” continues to build into an even larger climax in mm. 50-

Figure 4.37. Superimposed elements from *Souvenir* and *The Red Vineyard*, mm. 44-46
51, followed by a sudden pause indicated by a fermata over an eighth rest (Figure 4.38). The following statement of “Dear brother” should be *voix mixte* and full of passion, as if giving Theo a final silent goodbye before his death. In the dramatic pause, the singer should take extra time to prepare for the climax and end of the song cycle. The concluding statement of “Dear Theo” should be full of passion and be sung with the fullest most beautiful sound the singer is capable of making with a constant crescendo to the end of note. Under this passionate melody, the accompaniment should bring out the statement of the “souvenir theme” taking time on the accents to the final chord under the fermata, as if the spirit of Vincent is ascending outward and his goal of leaving a souvenir has been realized.

Figure 4.38. Ending of *Souvenir*, mm. 50-55
CONCLUSION

The letters of Vincent van Gogh are marked with details of his tragic struggle in life, yet his affecting sentiments show a man that cared deeply for the things that mattered most to him. While often misunderstood, he observed the world in a way that has brought beauty and inspiration to the lives of many. Moore has captured the profoundly beautiful moments of Vincent’s life in his song cycle. His attention to the text through his adaptation is enhanced with use of soaring melodies and complex harmonies that create an moving atmosphere befitting the great painter.

Because of the work’s musical and emotional complexity, it should be carefully programmed. It is suggested by this author that the cycle be programmed by graduate students or professional singers. The singer must be confident in vocal registration as the songs remain in middle voice before quickly ascending to a high climactic phrase. The tessitura and harmonic language can also be challenging for younger singers. Additionally, the accompaniment’s complexity in a majority of the songs requires a truly skilled pianist. The emotional depth of the songs might be difficult for a younger singer to fully grasp based on their shorter life experience. Despite the complexity and difficulty, singers and teachers will find the same emotional qualities and stirring texts that aid in Dear Theo’s success in many of Moore’s other compositions. Moore’s musical rhetoric throughout his compositions is one that gives great attention to text, creates realistic atmospheres, and like Vincent’s “souvenirs,” offers emotional expressions that will affect singers and audience members alike.


APPENDIX A:
TRANSCRIPT OF SKYPE INTERVIEW WITH BEN MOORE

Ben Moore: So what do you want to do today?

Greg Gallagher: Is there a certain time that you need to be somewhere?

Ben Moore: No, I’m fine.

Greg Gallagher: Ok. So I thought we would just kind of start with some biographical questions and then move into the inspiration and creation process of it and then specific music questions at the end?

Ben Moore: Yeah, sure.

G: Ok, great.

B: And you got my last email, right? I think I sent you my essay that I wrote about Dear Theo?

G: Yes. I have the preface letter from the score and then I have The Creation of Dear Theo and then I have the song texts that you notated.

B: There’s a lot of information in that essay that I wrote but…but you probably want to hear from my own mouth?

G: Yes. {laughs} Just, if you don’t mind. Ok, so, where and when were you born?

B: Ok, I was born in Syracuse, New York in 1960…January 2nd.

G: I was also born in Syracuse, New York. That’s crazy.

B: Are you serious?

G: Yeah!

B: A little later than me, though?!

G: {Laughs} Yes.

B: I only spent 3 years in Syracuse and then I ended up moving with my family to Clinton, New York outside of Utica, New York.

G: Sure. Yes.

B: How long were you in Syracuse?
G: I was there for about four or five years after I was born so, not...not too long. Um, what is your earliest memory? Do you remember Syracuse a lot or...?

B: I can’t say I actually do remember Syracuse because I think that the family moved just before I turned three. I can’t really separate some stories I was told from whether I actually remember. I kind of remember we lived on a street with lots of houses and houses were closer together and it was a hill...hillside, but this is about all I remember. Yeah.

G: {Laughs} Who was the most influential person to you or people, as a child?

B: Um, well, it would be my mother. I was closest to my mom when I was very young, although I had a pretty good relationship with my dad as well. But, um, my father was a very busy doctor so he was not as present as my mother, so my mother was my closest relationship and she was also a wonderful musician. My father was too, but as a pianist and a singer, she influenced me a lot.

G: And do you mind sharing their names with me?

B: Sure. So my mother is Joanna Moore - that is her married name. Her maiden name is Lafaro and my father, Roger, like the actor, Roger Moore.

G: Okay, great. What about your education and life as a student both in high school and/or college or...?

B: Yea, sure. I went through the local schools where I grew up in Clinton, New York and then I went to Hamilton College, which is also in Clinton, New York. You’ve heard of Hamilton?

G: I think I’ve heard of the name, yeah.

B: Yeah. And I went through four years there. You know when I was quite young I was a...not quite young...but for most of my youth I was mainly concentrating on visual arts.

G: Ok.

B: And I went to college and I majored in visual arts and painting, mostly at Hamilton College, but I also had the idea that I wanted to be a doctor so, I was kind of working in those two directions for a while. So I took all of the pre-med courses in college, but when it came time to graduate from college, I hadn’t done well enough in my Organic Chemistry and so I thought, well I’ll take some time off before I take that course over again, and I ‘ll go to New York and try my hand as an actor, so I went to the city, and then for the course of 6 years, I kind of stretched-out this process of um, auditioning for things and getting some roles and decided well, should I quit? Am I successful enough? I kind of stretched it out for 2 years, to 3 years, to 6 years before I gave up the acting career.

G: And so did you go straight to college after you graduated from high school then?
B: Yeah.

G: OK. So when you moved to New York City then, to be an actor, how old were you?

B: Uh, I would’ve been 21 when I graduated. Yeah.

G: Wow.

B: Yeah, and so I stayed in New York all the way until, well I’m still in New York.

{Connection temporarily lost}

B: And you’re probably wondering where does the music come in?

G: Yes, sorry I kind of lost you for a second.

B: Oh, i see! I thought you froze there. What was the last thing I said?

G: Um, you moved when you were 21.

B: OK. I moved to New York after graduating from college to try to be an actor in New York and I was trying to do that for 6 or 7 years and I think I was 29 when I started applying to graduate schools for visual arts with the idea that I would teach in the arts and that would be my career. But I should say that through all this period I was, um, you know, in my head writing music. You know, I was a pianist, um, and I was making up songs, I was putting them on tape, you know, like a portable tape recorder, but not taking it really seriously.

G: Ok.

B: And it wasn’t until I was 29 when friends of mine who had heard me play extemporaneously and encouraged me to…to at least take a workshop and pursue composing or writing in some way, shape, or form.

G: Interesting. Um, so then the visual arts were kind of like your favorite subjects in schools or were there other things that you enjoyed?

B: I loved the sciences too. Um, I loved physics and biology, not so much chemistry. Um, there’s part of my brain that really enjoys things that are absolute, but, uh, I loved the visual art as well and I loved my extracurricular choral activities always – taking voice lessons and piano lessons. I was taking constant piano lessons since I was 8 all the way through college.


B: So I loved all of that. I loved performing. I loved musical theatre and acting school. That was all very important to me. I was this crazy over-achiever in high school. I just…I did absolutely everything.
G: {Laughing}

B: I was president of my class, in every group you could possibly imagine – just constantly doing stuff!

G: And you said that your mother was most influential for the music, but what about the painting and the arts and things like that?

B: That was from my father because he was the painter in the family.

G: Oh. Ok.

B: He’s a physician, a family practice doctor, he still is, but in his youth he was also planning on being an art teacher. He went to art school for two years before giving that up and then going back to school.

G: Cool. Um, let’s see… do you remember what your first job was?

B: First job… besides paperboy? I remember that! I did that for many years when I was a kid, uh, and then different summer jobs, I mean, I worked at a nursing home one time during the summer, I did summer stock theatre, does that count?

G: Sure!

B: … in high school and college. Yep. When I moved to New York I was a waiter for many years just to make ends meet. I was a proofreader and then I played piano in lots of clubs. I played at the Saint Regis Hotel in the lobby, here in New York and I played at different piano bars in New York. They are long gone. Places like, “Broadway Baby”, and “Don’t tell Mamma”…? I’m not sure if I actually worked there but I can think of some others, like, “The Maitre D”…. various clubs where I sang, oh, “Mrs. J’s Sacred Cow I played and sang there, yes.

G: And this was all while you were interested in acting?

B: Exactly. Yeah.

G: And then after those 6 years you mentioned applying to grad school or..?

B: Yeah. I applied to school in the visual arts and I went to Parson School of Design starting in ’90, 1990, and that was a two-year program.

G: Ok. And then did you ever become an art teacher or are you an art teacher?

B: I did some of that after I graduated from school. I was doing continuing ED in Marymount College here in New York and I still teach in the visual arts, actually. I teach at the Guggenheim Museum and the Morgan Library here in New York.
G: Wow. That’s fun. So would you say that there was… that both music and art kind of hold equal places as far as careers for you?

B: Today? The art has really gone back on the back burner now. For years it was like an equal juggling act but I’d say through the 90’s and the early 2000’s, I was working really hard to keep both careers going but starting several years ago, when I lost my studio space here in New York and when my career as a composer began to take off a bit more and I had commissions which took up a lot of time, the visual arts had fallen away, but it doesn’t mean I don’t keep up with it, especially during the summer time. My partner Brian and I have a house in upstate New York and we… in the summers I have a space there that is not heated but it’s a place where I paint during the summers.

G: Ok. So yeah, let’s talk more about how you got into composition. You mentioned that your friends just from hearing you play at these different locations or…and you took workshops?

B: Um, no it was, to be honest…it was a boyfriend at the time, he just said, you know, you’re always making music at the piano, you’ve gotta pursue it and he made me take it seriously whereas I hadn’t taken it seriously before. And I’m not sure why I hadn’t… didn’t take it seriously… but I think it was partly… that, you know, when I was a music student I wasn’t as proficient as all my colleagues because I wasn’t a great pianist. And because of that I just felt that I wasn’t a good enough musician to be a composer, but what I didn’t really realize was I was perfectly fine as a musician. I had everything I needed to be a composer because you don’t have to really be a performer to be a composer. My issues I… you know if I was performing, even though I played in these piano bars, it’s a little different, but if I was on the spot in a concert, for instance, I would get very, very nervous and I could never be relied upon to give a perfect performance. But of course this doesn’t matter at all if you’re a composer and I think I just had some prejudice in my mind about not being able to do it. In fact, I think there are some advantages to not being a great musician actually to be a good composer because making mistakes gives you ideas as well. You mess around at the piano and you’re falling all over the keys sometimes… you make discoveries about the way things should be… so, um, what was your original question?

G: About how you got into composition…. so you said you took workshops. Did you do like any like theory education or just what you knew from piano background?

B: Well in college I took some music courses…so I took theory at school in Hamilton College, I took music appreciation, and I was in every choral group imaginable. I felt I had a good musical education in spite having not really taken it seriously in college. And then once I discovered this is something I really wanted to do, you know, the first thing I did was join a musical theatre workshop, which is called the BMI musical theatre workshop…you’ve heard of it?

G: Ok. Yeah.
B: It's sort of well-known here in New York and a lot, a lot of people... of important Broadway people have come out of that workshop so... I mean... the guys that wrote Avenue Q came out of there and the team that wrote the musical Ragtime. There are a lot... a lot of stuff. So once I joined that workshop, which happened at the exact same time when I went to graduate school for visual arts, I became really obsessed with it and it became just as important to me as my visual arts.

G: Ok.

B: But then, you know, in subsequent years after that, then I did a lot of mentoring with individual composers as well. I worked with a man named Josh Rosenbloom. He works at Yale now. He’s a wonderful composer and we worked together for a couple of years and I had private lessons with a man named Eric Ewazen who teaches at Julliard.

G: Oh Yeah!

B: Do you know Eric?

G: Yeah! I actually just did, for my last recital, I did... all living composers’ song cycles and I did one of his song cycles, so...

B: No kidding? No kidding? And the other guy is, his name is, Lance Horne, who also teaches at Julliard. We worked for a few... quite a few years together as well.

G: So when you first started, were you doing some of these more cabaret/musical theatre songs? Is that what you started composing or was it kind of a mixture?

B: That’s true... That’s true. I didn’t write my first art song until 2001 a friend of mine commissioned me to write.

G: Ok.

B: ...If you define art songs as a setting of a poem.

G: Sure. And is that... do you write mostly by commission now?

B: Yeah, now, I would say so. Yeah I’m too old to do things on the spot. I like to get a commission if I can.

G: What do you like to do in your spare time besides music and art, and is there other activities, hobbies that you enjoy?

B: Brian and I travel a lot if/when we can and we hike in the country. We play with our dog, Rosie, and we watch a lot of television... that’s about it! {He laughs}
G: {laughs} Sounds good to me! Let’s see...what do you view as your most significant accomplishments?

B: Oh my God! {He laughs} It’s hard to say. Well, you see when it comes to my music I always have a different favorite thing depending on the day that you ask me. {laughter} I mean I think this Dear Theo cycle is one of my favorite accomplishments but, in terms of just monumental feats, it would have to be this opera that I wrote called, Enemies, A Love Story, which I wrote over the course of 8 years working on it on and off. But you know when you’re writing for a full orchestra and a full-length opera, it has a particularly challenge that I think you might say would be more significant in some ways. On the other hand, I am very proud of one particular song that I wrote called, Lake Isle of Innisfree – I don’t know if you’ve heard of this one?

G: Yes.

B: If you’re a tenor you should sing it. It’s the song that gets the most…the most performances of mine, according to ASCAP surveys. {laughter} I’m very proud of that. And you know…besides that I’m proud of the charity work I do in my life and the friends and family, and so forth, you know… I mean that goes without saying.

G: Did you have siblings or anything growing up...or?

B: Yeah. I have four sisters and a brother.

G: Wow. And where do you fall in those lines?

B: Well I’m the fourth child. My brother is the oldest and then twin sisters who are older than me, then there’s me, and then I have two younger sisters.

G: That’s must’ve been…{laughs}

B: Do you have a big family too?

G: Nope. Just me and my sister, so not as crazy but…that must’ve been fun growing up with all of these people…

B: Um...kind of.

G: You get lost in the shuffle a bit probably {laughs}. So who are your biggest influences, who were, I should say, in art and music, as far as like... or not necessarily who influenced you but who you would turn to as far as style or inspiration?

B: So let’s start with music...I have in different stages of my life been in love with different composers. When I was a kid I used to play Tristan and Isolde over and over again. We had an LP of that. That influenced me a lot because I thought it was like the pinnacle of passion, you know, the love duet from Tristan and Isolde. I was just so enthralled with how transcendent that
music could be. And I also loved Puccini and Verdi and Mozart a little later in those days. But I also loved the really pure melodic music of the great musical theatre composers. So I think my favorites are Richard Rogers and Gershwin – just for their ability to write these very pure melodies that are…some of them I just think are just perfect, you know, just so unforgettable and so beautiful and at the same time very simple. You know, really quite simple in terms of how rangy there are, how complicated they are, and yet they had a real lasting value. Sometimes some great classical composers, you recognize their greatness but they may not have the ability to write just even that memorable melody, you know. So I admire that. But then since I’m an art song composer, some of my favorite art song composers are Reynaldo Hahn. Do you know who I’m talking about?

G: Yeah. Mm-hmm.

B: I think he’s someone really to emulate because his songs…many of them are really beautiful melodies I think, a real combination of the classical with some more modern elements, and Samuel Barber also. He’s not always beautiful melodically but he’s always got incredible structure and sophistication to his songs. So those are the one that I admire the most – I think they’re the most influential.

G: And what about the art and painting?

B: Yeah, I love van Gogh…are you surprised? {laughs} and I always have, since I was very young. But the other ones are Matisse and Cézanne. Those are the three – van Gogh, Matisse, and Cézanne, I’ve always loved them. Maybe I came to Matisse a little bit later but I never get tired of looking at their work.

G: What do you think are defining aspects of your musical style, or maybe, what other people have said about it?

B: Yeah, um…well….it’s funny…what I set out to do is not always what other people perceive in it…

G: Sure.

B: …but first I’ll say that what I set out to do is to find texts that have really…that have something to say that I really believe in. And then to…whether the music comes first or whether the text comes first…to have texts come across through melodic techniques that enhance the message of the text. So that’s my goal is to write something that is melodic but which is also contemporary and uses the whole range of harmonic possibilities that we have as modern composers but to still maintain this feeling of melody because I think that’s the greatest means of communication in music. And then to bring across a text that says something that is very important to me personally.

G: So you’ve kind of hinted at it a little but...
G: …how do you go about composing a piece of music then? What’s your process?

B: Yeah the process is always different {Greg laughs} …it really is. Sometimes people ask me, “well what was your process for writing a particular piece?” and I have absolutely no idea because I don’t really remember sometimes. But sometimes I do. But what I can say is that usually it’s music first, even with texts that are pre-set, even with texts that are a poem that I don’t change at all. Often times I’ll have a tune somewhere in my head or that I’ve recorded somewhere that I find that will fit that music. So that’s usually the case, but if it isn’t, then I will find a text and I’d memorize it and I’ll repeat it to myself and just live with it over time and with that memorized text and giving it plenty of time to kind of percolate in my brain; I will find that the main themes will come to me sort of spontaneously. And I find they’re always better that way rather than working them out technically. That being said, sometimes I have worked them out technically and it has worked out for me that way as well. But usually it’s kind of a fruitless struggle that kind of leads me down some paths that aren’t really all that productive. I like to let my subconscious work on it for a while. But once I hit upon some melodic themes that I like and I have the kernel of a song, then I have to work really diligently on the details. And I try to use many, many harmonic combinations and keys and modulations…different structural formats, you know, whether it’s ABA or whether it’s going to be more free form, and I just keep going back and forth and playing it on the piano and singing and recording it and then stepping way back and forth and maybe coming back the next day and listening to what I did yesterday, and that’s how I piece it together over time. And then, of course, I work it out as far as I can singing and playing at the piano and then I go on my computer and work on Sibelius and I just input it through my electronic keyboard and then once it’s in Sibelius I can play it back and I can fool with different keys and modulations and that helps me a lot too.

G: Interesting. So, I know that you talk about it a little in the things that you sent me, but, what inspired you to write, “Dear Theo?”

B: Yeah, the first inkling of it was when I was in the Van Gogh museum in Amsterdam, way back…it had to be 2003, or 4…I’m not even positive. If that’s important I can look it up in my old books, but, I think it’s 2003 or 4 and I came across a wall text for a painting and it was the text where he talks about…the he’s talking about death…life and death and mortality, and he’s telling his brother that all he wanted was to leave a souvenir of drawings or paintings just to show people that he was someone who felt things deeply; someone that had sincere feelings and basically saying that that would be enough for him. That was very moving because it made me very sad that he didn’t know how recognized he would be as a person who was very passionate, who was a great, great artist…people would be in love with his artwork and paying multi, multi-million dollar prices for these paintings. It was very moving to me that he never got an inkling of that because he died long before he got any recognition at all. He only sold one painting. I remember thinking… you know…at that time I thought, is there some way to turn this into some
kind of song or piece? And then I put it out of my mind for a few years. I did come back to it when I was asked to write a choral piece, and you might know that *Dear Theo* started as a choral piece and then extended into the song cycle for tenor later on.

G: So did you….that choral piece exists then…you finished that and then later came back to it?

B: Exactly. Yeah. And I extended the themes and ideas for the song cycle.

G: So does it have, then, some of the same elements as far as melody and…?

B: It has a lot of the same melodies, yes. Just not quite as expansive as the song cycle.

G: Ok. Do you remember any of the process in particular to the song cycle? Did you know where you wanted to put things? Or how did that happen? You know there’s some music that is kind of repeated sometimes and…

B: Yeah. I kind of felt my way through it. I just took the major themes in the choral piece and I turned them into individual songs. They’re obviously not…they’re woven together in a very different way, but you know, and with the song version, of course, I created musical piano accompaniments whereas the choral piece was a cappella.

G: Okay.

B: But it was slowly over time. I can’t remember which one…which song I wrote first. I may have started with *The Red Vineyard* right at the top…I think so. *Souvenir* at the same time, you know, very early on and then just sort of pieced it together slowly.

G: Do you know which ones are unique to the song cycle that aren’t in the choral piece?

B: Well, I know *The Man I Have to Paint* is unique to the song cycle. And the one that’s kind of transitional is largely unique to the song cycle…what’s it called?… *When I’m at Work*

G: Yes. OK.

B: Most of the others are pretty close to the choral version. But you realize that, you know, before doing anything, even the choral version, I was going through the letters and underlining the themes that interested me and then I was very flexible in piecing them together and doing some modifications. And you can see in that… other notated songs… you can see how the text that I ended up with, and the way they were taken from the letters. I think I’m pretty specific about that.

G: Yeah. So did that document happen before you started writing any of the music then?

B: No, I created that after because I was quite flexible as I was piecing it together, and then after I kind of settled on a form, then I kind of went back and kind of made a document of how I adapted it.
G: When you were adopting the texts, how did you choose the specific ones you used and then did you give yourself patterns or parameters for when you were adapting them? Or what kind of made those decisions for you?

B: Well that was hard. I really wanted to stick as closely to the text as I could, but to make a song out of prose is very hard because they just don’t speak in regular meters. I’m the…you know if I was a modernist composer that would be easy enough because you could just make the lines go on and ramble, but that’s just not the composer I am. So I would find these really potent phrases and I would repeat them and I would also, you know…I would read the whole letter and try to think about, “what’s the whole thrust of this letter?” And in one passage it’s hard to find a passage that summarizes the whole letter. So that’s where I took liberties to add some phrases, modify some phrases, so that it would express the feeling of a whole letter as opposed to just a small bit. And I think through the music and through the text the way I’ve adapted it, that it conveys a lot of what is thousands of pages of letters in a very short space of time. And I think it shows this emotional arch, which I discovered in the letters. Did you…have your read through the letters by any chance?

G: Yeah. I read through the entire book that you mentioned, the Roskill.

B: So, I hope you agree that the way that the song cycle breaks down, that it’s kind of like the emotional highlights of a whole large group of letters and the poignancy and the struggles of one man trying to explain his situation to his brother and up against all these odds. So that’s how I sort of justify some of the liberties that I took. But also, the fact is, these are translations anyway…

G: Right.

B: …from French and Dutch. And it’s impossible to know, you know… the only true setting would be to go back to the original languages. I mean, there has to be…there’s some gap between the original language and the translation anyway so I feel justified in getting in the whole zeitgeist of the letter…distilling it into smaller forms for my songs.

G: Were any of the text choices based on either rhythms or musical…like making them work within the music?

B: Sometimes, yes, sometimes not. So like, *The Man I Have to Paint*, I wanted to do that…that part verbatim because I really liked that phrase…so that’s basically verbatim and so I kind of created the melodies right from the text. But I remember, *Souvenir*, for instance…I hit upon this tune first, and I really liked the melody and so I adapted the ideas of the text to that melody in that case.

G: Mm-hmm. How long did it take you to write this, because I know in the score it says it’s copyrighted 2012 and then you have the letter from 2014…but…?
B: Yeah. I think I copyrighted it in ‘12 because that’s when I finished the first version of it and it’s wise to copyright something as soon as you have the first version…it’s just…it’s more protected, you know, even if you kind of tweak it along the way. But my music is always in process. I could still tweak this thing. It’s very hard for me to call something completely finished so in some sense I started thinking about it way back in 2004, and then the choral part piece is part of the process and then when I finished the cycle in ‘12, that’s another process, but then when we recorded it after that in ’14. I made some tweaks to it during that process as well.

G: Okay. Did you try to incorporate any of his painting style into the feeling of the music or was it just purely the emotions of the text…or…?

B: Well, you know, that’s probably hard to separate. It’s a good question. I haven’t actually thought about that too much, but uh, I think van Gogh’s, you know, incredible emotional style of painting is sort of inextricably linked to his volatile personality and passionate personality…they just…they flow together. When you look at his paintings you…you don’t think this is a very…this couldn’t have been created by a calm, nerdy guy – it’s impossible. So they’re of a piece and…you know… when he talks…”the man I have to paint” is…I look at some of those portraits and I think I was thinking somewhat of those portraits with the bright blue background and orange and yellow in the hair and so forth…this kind of electric quality. So there’s…even though I wasn’t consciously thinking about it, it was no doubt part of it.

G: Mm-hmm. How do you think this cycle fits into the rest of your compositions? Would you say it’s a high point, would it be different…or?

B: Well I wrote another piece called John and Abigail based on letters of John and Abigail Adams. That’s being recorded on a Song Fest album. I hope it will come out later this year. And that’s another piece similar to this, in that, it takes excerpts from the letters they wrote to each other and juxtaposes them. The difference with that one is that it’s one long piece without breaks between the songs, but they are songs. They just kind of segue way into each other, and it’s a duet, which is obviously the difference. But I would say the process of writing that is very similar to what I did with, Dear Theo, and I think those are the only two pieces that I…in which I’m setting prose, or adapting prose. The other song cycle that I wrote called, So free am I has some similarities to this and this predated…So free am I, predates Dear Theo – similar in that it’s a cycle that has an overriding theme, you know they are different authors to the different poems…I tied them all together musically, these songs, and some themes kind of bleed into the others like I did with Dear Theo. But, you know, then my other cycle, Ode to a Nightingale, has thematic through-line, but that’s one solid poem where I didn’t adapt the text at all. I just set it verbatim. So that’s a bit different. But it’s definitely part of a progression from, So free am I, to Dear Theo, Ode to a Nightingale, and then to John and Abigail which is more recent.
G: So can you talk about... do you see it as an actual cycle, like, I guess cyclical? And did you think about connecting them, or you know the journey... or is there a journey? Can you kind of talk to some of those ideas?

B: Well I think of it more as a stream of consciousness view of the letters. A journey kind of implies a chronological path and the letters are not chronological. You know, in general, the earlier texts come earlier in the cycle, but the fact is he repeats himself a lot in the letter -- the same ideas throughout -- and when you read... when you read through that book of letters, you don’t stop and think, what came before. What you kind of get is this overall feeling of the man and that’s what I wanted to portray in the cycle. So we actually switched around the order... I switched around the order a few times and I actually switched it around even in 2014 when we decided to finally record it, partly on the advice of the tenor who was singing it at the time. But he made a good case to me for the way they seemed to fit together emotionally. For instance, the song “Already Broken” was earlier in the cycle. And for him... he said I... that seems like... kind of like the end of the journey for him before the revelation at the end and he convinced me to put it in just before the last song and I think... I think he was right.

G: Did you know you always wanted to write it for tenor? Or why did you choose the tenor voice?

B: Um, I see the kind of a tension... of the... my whole feeling about van Gogh as a man in a higher voice... male voice. There’s something comforting about the baritone voice, no matter how exciting you might be as a baritone... I think it’s possible that a baritone could sing Dear Theo in a lower key but the fact is that most baritones have a mellow approach, especially when they’re singing in the middle voice, and most tenors have a... have a urgency in their voice, throughout the voice, and that’s one of the miracles of the tenor voice, you know.... it feels... sometimes it sounds actually dangerous, especially when you go up high, and that’s why I don’t envy you guys that try to sing the tenor repertoire. But that little bit of tension and danger in the sound is prefect for van Gogh.

G: Hm. How would you rate the difficulty of these pieces for people looking to perform them?

B: Well, they’re hard. {laughter} You can attest to that! They’re not for your high school you know, neophyte. I’ve got other songs for those people! {laughter} This... you have to be a really well-trained singer... not only a singer but you have to really be a good performer and a good actor. This is like a drama that you gotta take the audience through and you can’t... you can’t sit back and do kind of just a musical interpretation, you have to dig into the text and have a point of view about who this man is. And you have to make the audience feel for him. I mean it’s in the music, but if the performer doesn’t feel strongly about it, it’s not gonna come across, I think, to the audience, so it’s a high level of difficulty. A big range too. You know, it goes pretty low for tenor. I think there are some middle C’s in there, right? And how high do I... I go up to an A...?

G: An A I think...
B: Yeah, an A. yeah.

G: Do you think that they should always be performed in the context of the cycle or do you think people could extract them for recitals?

B: I’m happy for people to extract them. I know some people have and usually it’s the first and the last that people do. But I heard a guy just sing, I think, “Already Broken” just as a song in an audition. Obviously, a song like that would be better in the context but I think especially the first, the last, and …what’s another one? Well they all could in way…. the only one that really can’t be excerpted is that one, “When I’m at work.” But I’ve heard “The Man I Have to Paint” on its own. They can work surprisingly well on their own.

G: Alright. Do you have a score with you or do you know it well enough if I ask reference some specific things you can….

B: Uh oh! I…I can bring it up on my computer.

G: Ok.

B: Ok I’ve got it up here.

G: Ok. I kind of have just random, either questions about the feeling or clarification. And if there’s anything else you feel like should be added or known about them, feel free…

B: Okay.

G: Okay, so the first thing I have here is, do you use specific key signatures for any specific reasons? Like is there, for instance, a reason this is in D minor? Or is it just what sounds the best for the emotion you’re trying to go for?

B: You know, some people are very specific about the magical qualities of a key; not so much me. In fact, I’m very happy to transpose things up and down for singers to get the sweet spot in someone’s voice. And as long as it doesn’t go too high or too low to kind of muddle or do damage to the piano accompaniment, I’m very happy to put it in the best key. And that goes for you too, when you perform this, you know, if you want to nudge it up a step or a half-step or down a step or a half-step, I’m happy to do that.

G: Wow. Ok. Thanks. I’m assuming that… I noticed things like, every time you mention a color in the first couple of pages, that it has a different kind of chord. Was that intentional for trying to paint those colors, I guess, musically?

B: I’m glad you picked up on that. That’s exactly what I was thinking of. I was trying to think of analogous chord relationships that just for me, personally, suggested the colors he was talking about.
G: Mm-hmm. One particular for instance is that yellow kind of sticks out and it kind of jumps up in the range?

B: It goes to D Major there, right? Oh that’s violet is D Major… where is yellow?

G: Yellow is on the first page. I think it’s E Major and it’s kind of where everything starts to pick up again after the…

B: Oh, this is the, “turn to yellow”. So I’m kind of in G Major then Bb, then E Major. Obviously yellow is very bright and E major is a very bright chord, but it could be any major chord it depends on just the relationship you know.

G: Mm-hmm. So for this song, did the text primarily lead your rhythmic choices?

B: Mostly, yes. I was playing with the text in my head and then came up with this…this opening theme I was thinking a little bit about…you know, he was a missionary, a religious man in the beginning. I was thinking about making kind of like a hymn because he was a religious man, and then he became shifted away from religion and he became religious about his art.

G: Right.

B: So his religious passion kind of transferred to his passion for what he was doing.

G: Yeah. What role do you think the piano plays in this piece? Is it…like are there any psychological factors or what is kind of the overall emotion or atmosphere you’re trying to create?

B: Yeah – kind of like a hymn in the beginning and then after violet, it kind of revs up, right?

G: Mm-hmm. Yeah.

B: And I tried to find figures that -- as I do in many places -- that sort of echo this idea of his ever-bubbling passion underneath the surface. If you’re someone who can get really excited about just describing a scene… that has to be part of van Gogh’s personality…

{Connection temporarily lost}

B: ….yeah all those triplets that build up on the second page, that just…it’s as simple as that – it’s just his passion, his excitement for what he’s looking at.

G: Mm-hmm. Why…when you write “ecstatic,” what is important about that? Did you want it…is it for the voice so that it doesn’t sound harsh or…?

B: No, I wanted…it’s kind of like an acting note. I wanted the performer to look like they’re having a spiritual moment, you know?
G: Ok. Yeah. That’s helpful. Can you clarify for me in measure 30…it’s where it’s talking about the starry night…the fermatas in the piano part and how you kind of want that to go? Because there’s that fermata on that rest and then…?

B: Oh yeah, I put a fermata on there just to mean the singer can go, “I think that I must have a starry night”, and then the pianist can wait a bit if he wants or she wants, for the singer before that little figure, {hums motive}. And then just hold…I want to give the freedom, the feeling that you can hold, you can pause there, you can hold on those notes…to give…after all this activity on the page before…to give a moment of some peace that I kind of imagined him feeling when he was looking up at the stars.

G: Hmm. So there could be almost even silence before going on to the next phrase?

B: Yes. Yes. Maybe there was a better way to notate that, but yeah.

G: {Laughs} No! Let’s see…where is that? Oh sorry, going backwards…on the previous page you have the, “Oh Theo, brother,” and then you put, “long pause.” What is the reason behind that and maybe how long should that be?

B: I want to give the performer the license or, you know, allow him to feel what comes next. So I find sometimes if I write “long pause” it gives someone the permission (that’s the word, permission!) to take as much time as they need to start the next section. “Oh Theo, brother,” …when you start something brand new, you have to do some psychological shifts; it’s like an acting beat – back to my days of acting, you know? And it happens to be from a different part of a different letter …I think it’s a different letter, maybe not. But it jumps some passages there so it…just to me…it needed an acting beat there. Does that make sense?

G: Yeah, that makes a lot of sense. And right before that…sorry I went backwards, or I jumped ahead. In the piano at the climax of that rising phrase, the left hand has the fermata; should the right hand also have a fermata on the top?

B: Yeah.

G: No! {laughs} I mean, I was just looking and I noticed that and I was like…oh. I mean I had always been doing it that way and then I realized, oh, maybe…?

B: I’m adding it right now!

G: {laughs}

B: Alright. Ok. It makes no sense to have one thing in one hand and nothing in the other hand.

G: You’ve kind of already talked about it a little bit, but the texture of the piece kind of going from more simplistic to these triplets and then back again to the triplets later on at the end…is that just kind of his ever…you know…the psychological tension of him as a person I guess?
B: Yeah. You know, I think a good adjective for Van Gogh is volatile. In other words, he…it doesn’t mean he flies off the handle all the time, but it means that he’s taken to just bursts of emotion that come out of nowhere. So in several parts in the cycle I try to do that. He can sing a phrase very calmly and then it can burst out and I think it captures his personality.

G: Okay. Let’s see…Oh, the kind of motive element at the end in measure 54 seems important because it kind of comes back in couple of other songs...

B: Does it? I don’t know.

G: Maybe one other time – at the end of number 2, it’s kind of reminiscent of that.

B: {Hums motive} Yeah. It is a little bit reminiscent. You’re right. Yeah. So this is just me, the composer, trying to tie the songs together. Yeah. {Laughter}

G: Okay! And should the ending then still be free so that’s its more delivered freely instead of strictly in tempo there at the…

B: “Ever Yours?”…

G: Yeah.

B: Yes. Did I write freely? I didn’t, but I think you have the right instinct if that’s what you’re thinking.

G: Okay. On the second song then, you write “throbbing” – is that for both piano and voice or what kind of things were you… or how do you achieve that? Or what did you want to be achieved?

B: No one ever understands throbbing. I’ve had people ask me that before. I want it to {hums articulations} but that’s hard to get on a piano, it’s like you want it to be on a cello or something. But it’s just another version of his always passionate heart and there’s a lot of heart-ache in this song and I wanted to get that across. {hums motive and articulations}…

G: So on the strong beats then, kind of a little bit more emphasis?

B: Yeah, {continues humming motive} that kind of thing.

G: Okay. And what kind of… when you say, “speech rhythm intense” is that kind of accentuated diction or rhythm or both or is it kind of an element that is brought into the vocal tone or color?

B: I want it to be just the way you’d say it, you know? “I found a woman, not young, not beautiful.” {Sings the phrase}. Just simple, the way you’d speak it.

G: And not like in strictness.
B: {Sings phrase again, syllabically} No.

G: {Laughter} It seems that…when you read this text or were trying to set this text, I mean in a way it has a positive feeling to in that he’s found this person that he seems to love yet the music is very painful. Was that a choice or…?

B: Yeah, because I think he knows it’s not gonna last. That’s my feeling about it. And I think this letter… I think it’s about the prostitute that he took in, if you read about his life… he took in a prostitute who had a daughter, and even though Van Gogh is as poor as anybody, he actually took care of this woman, he was in love with her, and he took care of her child as well, but something happened. I don’t think we know for sure, they had an argument and it didn’t last for very long but this letter he is writing to his brother at a time when he’s taken her in…or he’s about to take her I think. He’s gotta be very apologetic I mean he comes from a religious family. He knows this is not going to be accepted so he is making his case that okay, she’s…you don’t have to look too hard to read between the lines – this is a prostitute but he loves her and he does not condemn her. And in fact, he shares everything with her, which I try to emphasize in the song.

G: Would you say that informed the texture – because it seems more minimal than most of the other ones?

B: Yeah….

G: …or just more simplistic instead or more complex rhythms and things like that.

B: That’s probably right. But that’s not something I would’ve done consciously really but I think just responding to the text that came out that way.

G: Okay. Let’s see if I have anything else…Ah, when he’s talking about not condemning them, you have some crescendos. Should that be… should that grow pretty loud as an outburst or should it be somewhat contained or…?

B: You know, people love to do this part very quietly…people that I’ve heard do this, but I would love to hear it very passionately – that’s why I put those crescendi in there. {Speaks text passionately}

G: Right.

B: I think he could get angry and very strong there but I haven’t heard anyone do it that way. There’s someone…I think there’s some instinct for people do that quietly. It works ok quietly but it’s funny you should point that out… I have those there for reason, {Laughs} yeah.

G: I think that’s all I had about that one unless there’s anything else you wanted to add. It’s also a little bit lower in the range.

B: Uh-huh.
G: Were you trying to create a more…a warmer sound…or?

B: I probably…to be mostly speech-like.

G: Right.

B: …and I think it a little lower in the voice helps that cause. Is it too low for you?

G: No.

B: Okay. Yeah, I think it does sound more like speech when it’s a bit lower.

G: Mm-hmm. Number 3, is it safe to say that you were trying to go for a lullaby kind of feel?

B: Yeah. For sure.

G: Do you think it should…any rocking motion since it’s 6/8 or do you think it’s more legato with direction?

B: That sounds more like it. I think the 3 beat is enough of a lullaby feel. I’m afraid if you rock to it it’ll take away from the text a bit.

G: Mm-hmm. I find these dissonances really interesting. Is this the kind of pain that he is not…even though he’s kind of saying that he’s over the idea of having children of his own, it’s still there for him?

B: Yeah. It’s…he’s showing…he’s expressing his love and pride in his little nephew. Was it a nephew? Yeah I think.

G: Mm-hmm

B: And…but it’s full of regret, you know, between the lines, it’s full of regret. So I’d rather…I hope it’s not too obvious but I turn this lullaby into at least painful notes that express some of that feeling.

G: Yep. And can you talk about…this one has kind of little outbursts where it will like kind of grow and then it will have this kind of piano or kind of bringing it back down again. I see that’s on purpose and should they be sudden or almost shocking? For example, measure 11 and 12… and 18 to 20…

B: Yeah. You’ve got that right. “Oh to desire something else, often I think” You know I think our mind does turn on a dime very often. Just before that he’s… I was thinking he’s kind of talking himself out of it, you know. “I’m too old, too old to declare…” He’s protesting too much as Shakespeare would say it. You know, the subtext then is “damn, I’ve wasted my life. I should’ve had a family.” So he’s saying I’m too old, I don’t care, blah, blah, blah. “Often I
think of your baby.” It’s how the mind works, we get ourselves worked up and then we go to a moment of tenderness and then we turn to some jealousy and then we turn back to something else. Thoughts pass through our mind. This idea of stream of consciousness was in my head a lot in the whole process of writing this, from song to song and within each song too.

G: And I know you say that keys are not always important to you, but did you want a more simplistic key for this one? I mean this is in C Major as opposed to maybe something more adventurous…I don’t know?

B: That’s true, but, I honestly don’t think about that. I mean does C Major really sound that different from Db Major? Some people say it does. I don’t have a brain like that. I don’t think it does. I can’t tell… I don’t have perfect pitch. I can’t tell what key someone is singing in.

G: {Laughs} Me either! Let’s see…at the end, at the…when he’s saying, “long ago,” should that all remain forte until…until the end of that line?

B: I think it’s effective that way. Yeah. It makes a nice contrast. I can see it would be tempting to do a diminuendo but, it’s in line with his kind of volatile nature to outburst and then interior, right?

G: Right. And then, that final chord, with that dissonance there…I feel like when I listen to some of the recordings, I don’t always hear that.

B: Yeah. It should be brought out – I mean, the pianist should try to bring it out. It brings out a certain ambivalence, you know, if it all you hear is a pretty you know, dominant chord it doesn’t send the right message, I think.

G: I’m very curious to know how you came up with these rhythms in number 4 {laughs}.

B: {laughs also} I don’t know! I guess I was just messing around at the piano. They’re not really complicated rhythms they’re just complicated clusters. Though it looks scary when it says 11, but it’s just big arpeggiated chords basically, and hopefully the effect is just a {makes a rumbling sound}… just a…kind of a roiling. I write “roiling” there. It’s pretty easy to play too. Do you play the piano?

G: Yeah. I do.

B: So it looks hard to play but it’s not really that hard to play, right?

G: Yeah. Not too bad {Laughing} I wouldn’t want to play it, though! And then you say, “phrase similarly” is that with the slur markings you have or also the dynamics for the first measure? Should each of them kind of…

B: Yeah, that was my idea – the slurs and the dynamics.
G: Okay. Do you think that…were you going for anger or frustration? What do you think the mood of this is?

B: It starts out more like in excitement to me but it’s excitement mixed with frustration, because he’s so excited about his motif but he feels like he can never really capture what he’s after. And so, if you read the letters, you noticed he’s always saying, you know…I’m working really hard, I’m gonna get there…but he doesn’t feel he’s there. He sees something he’s very excited about. He paints a masterpiece – that we know now as a masterpiece but to him, he hasn’t quite gotten there. So that underpins it. And then this kind of leads into actual anger when he starts thinking of his critics who will dismiss his work, that makes him furious. And then he says…I’m doing what I wanna do, I’m working hard, I’m gonna get there. It’s all very fraught.

G: Mm-hmm. Did that inform how you are treating the vocal line? Because it kind of starts out a little bit more lyrical like the rest of the songs and then there’s these kind of more random leaps?

B: That’s true, isn’t it? Actually the tune of the beginning is more or less regular and it’s the piano that has all the emotion in it. But then it’s almost like he picks up…it’s like you’re nervous under the surface and then that bubbles up into your conscious mind. I’m only coming up with this as I speak! {laughter} I never thought of it at the time.

G: When you are writing things like this, is it that you are trying to display the overall emotion or are there instances where you will try to color certain words? For instance, having the vocal line go down on “south” or did that just kind of happen?

B: It wasn’t calculated, but probably…it probably wouldn’t have worked if it went up, you know, so I would’ve rejected that {laughter}. Yeah.

G: Oh… in measure 30…I always find that part interesting because you kind of have these consonant chords and then the voice kind of adds the dissonance there.

B: Yeah. So that’s a D# sharp chord over A#...

G: Especially with, mostly that B at the end especially against all of the rest of it.

B: {Singing, “I choose the first…”} It was just an instinctual way of setting it. {Reading and singing, “The only choice I have is between being a good painter and a bad one…I choose the first”}. I think it’s almost like an obvious statement, you know, it’s like he’s telling his brother…this is no surprise to his brother, “of course I want to be a good painter.”

G: Right. Mm-hmm. And all of these chords with the trills, they should be played as written and then the grace note as the trill, correct?

B: That’s true. Yeah. People have different ways of representing a trill. What I also like…I like these trills to start on the upper note so…so that’s why I chose the grace note way, {sung demonstration}, like that. Most of the time you start on the bottom note, so when you see it
notated like this, it not only shows you what note to trill with, but it tells whether you want it to start on the upper or the lower.

G: Okay. Can you talk about the ending where it says, “freely over the piano texture,” is that mostly tempo and you want the rhythms as you’ve kind of dictated them there, or…?

B: It means that the singer shouldn’t get worked up about fitting his words…his vocal line precisely with the piano. It should come across as a constant texture underneath that is almost spoken on top of.

G: Sure. Mm-hmm, and then you say, “fast segue way to the next song” Should it be almost immediately? Did you think of these as kind of the same…in the same vein, I guess, when you were working on them?

B: Yeah. That’s a good question. Some of the songs can stand a nice break, like before “The man I have to paint,” that’s where you can sort of step away from the piano, take a breath, start the next one. Certain other ones feel like you want to keep the momentum going, at least I do…or they work out nicely harmonically and this is a case where the drama seems to indicate that it just needs to keep going. Especially since this is a song about working from a motif and then immediately he says, “but when I’m at work I feel an unlimited faith in art,” and it has a nice logical link, I think, that you would lose…you’d lose that if you waited too long between these two.

G: Sure. Mm-hmm. Can you talk about the tonality of this fifth one?

B: Yeah, this one is almost atonal. It has no real center key, that’s why it’s hard. It’s a very tricky one to learn, but that’s the idea. It’s getting to the point of the cycle where I’ve taken phrases from all over the texts, you know --- from early, middle and late, and it’s like all of these ideas are popping in your idea in truly a stream of consciousness way. So that’s why I felt I had to set it not in a melodic way or in any one key. So I set it with no key signature, but it could be, you know…it’s probably…it could be set in several key signature but it’s probably easiest just to have no key signature.

G: Mm-hmm. And would you say that these…the piano is kind of always pushing you to the next vocal thought or something?

B: Yeah. Yeah, I think so. {Sings rhythm} And then the singer can take their time. {Singing} “When I’m at work I feel an unlimited faith in art and that I shall succeed…” {Singing rhythm again}”And when doubt overcomes me…”

G: So a lot of this should be kind of driven by the text then…more free than…

B: Absolutely. A lot of it’s very parlando, which is not to say it all should be, but I think it’s effective if parts of it are almost spoken.

G: What about as far as for the pianist, what about like pedaling and things like that?
B: Um, I didn’t indicate pedaling, did I?

G: Yeah.

B: But obviously when I have these long tied notes you gotta use the pedal to keep those notes strong or sounding at least. Um, I’m leaving that up to the pianist to make a decision. I mean it shouldn’t be…it shouldn’t have to much pedal or it’ll get muddy.

G: Yeah.

B: There are parts that might sound good quite spiky, but that’s the kind of thing you work out with your pianist. If you have a certain emotional take on a certain line then you want to do some of those phrases a little more sustained with the pedal or vice versa.

G: And should the end kind of just die away? Kind of almost like a fermata at the end?

B: “I’m still at work. I’m still at work.” Not necessarily die away. I think its determination. “I’m still at work. I’m still at work.” Hopefully when you get this all rehearsed I would love to hear it. We could Skype or something. I don’t know. Or if you come to New York…you ever come up here?

G: Not really but…yeah.

B: We could do something on Skype.

G: Ok. That would be awesome. So, did you want the same feeling as you had in number two? You have “pulsating.” Is that different than throbbing?

B: {Laughs} I beg your pardon. {laughter}Let’s see.

G: Is it mostly about the tenutos or…

B: It is similar in a way. {Singing} In fact, I think I got these mixed up a little earlier. Throbbing and pulsing. Throbbing I think is a little more…can extend a little wider…{sings} …longer phrases, whereas this is a little shorter. {Sings phrase again} That’s the only difference.

G: OK. So again kind of on these stronger beats even for the voice?

B: Not so much for the voice. Pulsing in the accompaniment.

G: Alright. Did you come up with, maybe you won’t remember, this counter-melody that’s in the piano that is kind of different from the one in the voice…did you come up with that simultaneously or does that have a specific meaning do you think?

B: That is a question I don’t know the answer to. Where does the counter-melody come in?
G: Where you have the “bring out the slurred voice..” in the piano.

B: Oh I see what you mean. Right from the top. Oh yeah, yeah. Well that’s the melody…that’s what I’m trying to show as the melody. {Sings melody} I don’t think of the rest as counter-melody so much as accompaniment.

G: OK.

B: But you’re right. It is kind of two melodies coming together. But that’s the one that should come forward.

G: This one has a lot more key changes or indicated key changes. Can you talk about that? Was that something that kind of just happened or was editorial?

B: Well, I think it basically kind of just happened but the major key change happens from the minor to the major where the text turns hopeful so whether that was just fortuitous or not, I liked it when I realized that those came together. I’m trying to find where that actually happens. Well it does bottom of the second page… “soon yes very soon…” then at the top of the second page too. “Then I can see a time that’s just on the horizon.” That goes from minor to major, which just mirrors the text really and then it goes to another bright key at the bottom of the page with “soon, yes, very soon” So I can’t tell you if I planned it, I don’t think I actually planned it that way, but it came together that way.

G: And most of the vocal phrases start with these leaps of sixths or sevenths. Was that just a particular melody that stuck out to you or did that have…indicate a specific emotion that works with the text?

B: You just mean that {Sings opening melody}? Um, I think I was just kicking around the text…or the idea of text… in my mind and this is what came to me. I didn’t think technically about that leap. How does it register with you that kind of leap?

G: I think it makes it sound kind of yearning or painful, I mean cause it’s such a bigger leap, and that each phrase is kind of starting with that, but I didn’t know if that was…

B: {Sings} Yeah but melodies that have small leaps can also be yearning. It’s one of those things that just sort of came from my subconscious. As a composer you think of a lot of ideas and reject most of them. Then you get an idea that seems right. Then people write about what you’ve done and they think it’s wonderful how he planned for this to happen. {Greg laughs} I never thought of any of that. It’s just little ideas popping around in your head. And as I say you reject most of them and then you hit upon something.

G: So number seven…

B: Yes.
G: You said that you wrote that early on and that this text was kind of the inspiration for everything, correct?

B: This was the first text that got me excited about writing this: first the choral version, then the cycle. Yeah. Yep.

G: And did you always know that this music and text would kind of be the ending of it?

B: No the text was in my mind years before and then I came up with this tune just fooling around. I thought of it in my head and then I worked it out on the piano and then I recorded it. And then just spontaneously I thought, gee, this idea of the souvenir fits pretty well with this tune and I pieced it together that way. It’s as simple as that. It’s a tune that fit the emotion and I just brought them together.

G: Is there something you were trying to accomplish with the introduction of the first three chords?

B: Yeah that I remember I added that later. I was trying to think of a way begin this piece. And it just didn’t seem right to start with the tune. And then I could have made a more traditional introduction, which kind of introduced the tune first or something. None of that seemed right. It’s just in keeping with this constant tension that he’s feeling. So the tune comes out unexpectedly out of those dissonant chords, and it gives it kind it a chance for the listener to kind of settle into the melody. It just felt more effective that way.

G: Yeah. What about this interlude then at the bottom of that page? And you say “no pedal,” is that just for clarity’s sake or does it have a purpose beyond that?

B: I do say that don’t I? I didn’t want it to sound lyrical at all. I wanted some dissonances there and I wanted them to be really plain and audible. So that’s what that is. It’s just my common trick of juxtaposing a lyrical melody with something that’s sharper to get the whole psychological balance.

G: Yeah.

B: Because I was convinced that if this tune was just a pretty tune that went in a predicable shape that it would short-change this character that I’m writing for. Because he wouldn’t just sing a pretty tune. It would have to be juxtaposed with these little outbursts of tension and ambivalence and dissonance.

G: And this is one of the only ones that has a significant amount of repeated text. Was that on purpose? Kind of building up to the emotions of the end?

B: Yeah, because I wanted to write this long building section starting at the bottom of page 24 there, m. 22, and when you’re building through that, I could have found other words from the letters, but the listener doesn’t want to digest too much new information at this point about him. And it’s in keeping with the way we think; that we repeat the phrases over and over. I mean it
may not be in the letters themselves, but from a psychological point of view I think its valid. So that’s how I struck upon this idea.

G: And did you know early on that you wanted to include the music from the first one into this one? Or did you write this one first or how did that kind of happen?

B: I’m thinking back. I guess this proves that I wrote the first one first. Or at least I didn’t write the full form of this last one until relatively late in the game. I think I was just playing this on the piano and I was just getting carried away at the piano and I just brought that tune in and I liked the way that sounded. And it just seemed to bring it home…what matters most to this man is the beauty of the world itself. And that’s how the piece starts, his love for beauty and I wanted to drive the point home and what better way than bringing back the tune from the beginning?

G: Why did you do this on the end, the “piano” on the “dear brother,” right before the big ending?

B: I think I wanted to show the complexity of the relationship with his brother. So there had to be an interior version of it, juxtaposed with a passionate loud version. He sometimes feels very affectionate and warm with his brother, he’s sometimes angry with him, he’s sometimes frustrated with him, and above all he loves his brother and depends on him. So, you sing something pianissimo and you get a feeling of tenderness I think.

G: I just have one question that kind of came to me after that, which doesn’t really have anything to do with the music so is there anything else you want to talk about as far as the music or that you think people should know?

B: I could think some more about it, but I think you’ve covered a lot of the more interesting aspects about it. So, I think we’re pretty good on that. And when you write all this up, I’ll take a look and maybe I can think of some other things as well.

G: OK.

B: Yeah, when I see it.

G: So my last question was just, are there any particular events or event that kind of shaped who you are as a person today?

B: Wow, big events that shaped who I am as a person? There’s so many. I’m thinking about all of these traumatic events but I would say there have been a lot of psychological struggles throughout my life and I think to be a good composer, to have something beautiful or interesting to say in your art, there has to be some suffering. I mean, right? There has to be, because that’s how you uncover something deeper inside you. Big struggles of being gay growing up and having very conservative parents and trying to break free from that; being religious as a young man and then breaking away from religion later on; …and then losing [a loved one] was not so wonderful, but it was just as I was starting out as a composer so it did shape a lot of things that I started to write about, thought about. It’s these traumatic events that make you appreciate the
sweet things in life and make you/focus you do to do things that you care about in life as opposed to doing what people expect you to do. Things that remind you of your mortality, just like Van Gogh, make it more urgent that you express yourself in a way that has some meaning. It gives you a little bit of comfort that part of you is left behind – or not even that – just to share some of that experience with someone else. A lot people say that a lot of my music has a sadness that’s kind of built into it. I don’t know if you agree with that but there is kind of a melancholy in the work I do, but I like to think that there is a catharsis in it. This cycle, for instance, in every song you can feel the pain that this man has gone through, but through music…music has this transcendence to it so I hope people take away that it’s worth it, it’s worth the struggles, and when you have an avenue to express yourself, that makes life worth living and when you share it with other people, what could be better?
Little appreciated during his lifetime, Vincent van Gogh is widely regarded as one of history's greatest painters and a vital contributor to the development of modern art. His brother Theo ran a successful art gallery in Paris and provided unfailing financial support to Vincent throughout his career, allowing him to devote himself entirely to painting. Their lifelong friendship is recorded in the hundreds of letters they exchanged from August 1872 until July 1890 and is the source for most of what is known about the thoughts and beliefs of the artist.

This cycle for tenor voice and piano is a setting of selected passages from the letters which I have adapted from the original English translation (translated from their original French or Dutch) which express major emotional themes that run throughout the correspondence. In these seven songs I have tried particularly to emphasize the poignant fact that Vincent would never know the tremendous value and influence his art would eventually acquire, and how, for instance, in August of 1883 he could write that what he wanted was to leave ‘a souvenir’ to express the depth of his feeling. The words to the first song are based on letters from 1888. Other passages were based on or adapted from letters dated April ’88, July ’82, December ’81, August ’83 and August ’87. It should be noted that in certain cases I have modified the translations and repeated certain words or phrases, to allow for a more regular musical structure. In each case I strived to maintain the spirit and intention of van Gogh’s original words.

This piece holds a special meaning for me since, as a painter myself, I have been moved and inspired by van Gogh’s work since early childhood. I also believe that whether one is an artist, a musician, or an appreciator of art, one cannot help but feel a connection to this man who, through great financial and personal hardship, maintained a passion for his work and for life in general.

Ben Moore, 2014

*The texts are based on or adapted from the first English translation of letters written by Vincent van Gogh to his brother Theo entitled The Letters of Vincent van Gogh (Constable, 1927). A majority of the letters in the collection were translated by Van Gogh’s sister-in-law, Johanna van Gogh-Bonger, who died in 1925.*
Since the release of the recording "Dear Theo" on Delos records it's been gratifying to hear the comments of many people who have been moved by the CD. The opening cycle in particular, which is also the title of the album, seems to have struck a chord. Some have expressed curiosity about how I came to write it and what my process entailed. So I thought I would share here some of the facts about its creation.

Dear Theo, for tenor voice and piano, is based on certain passages from the letters of Vincent van Gogh to his brother Theo. The work actually began as an a cappella choral piece of the same name which I wrote in 2009. That work was commissioned by Robert Cowles of Hobart College and premiered there in 2010. (Dear Theo for chorus will receive its New York premiere by the New Amsterdam Singers on May 28th, 2015.) In the years since the premiere of the choral version I slowly worked on the song cycle, utilizing and transforming many of the themes from the choral piece.

For both versions my process has involved a careful reading and rereading of the letters, identifying what were for me the most potently emotional passages and phrases, juxtaposing them, and then adapting them to music. Each version or form has, of course, its own advantages and limitations. The fact that the song cycle includes piano accompaniment allowed me to create music in which the piano could provide background textures, for example, whereas in the choral work I could make use of vocal counterpoint. For the song cycle I mined many more passages from the Van Gogh correspondence to create a substantially longer work.

Most song cycles are settings of established poems. Less commonly, they may be set to original lyrics. Rarely are they based on prose, though some contemporary examples spring to mind such as Libby Larsen's wonderful "Try Me Good King." Dear Theo was the first song project based on prose that I had attempted. The first glimmer of the idea came to me while I was vacationing in Amsterdam in the Netherlands many years ago and paid a visit to the Van Gogh Museum. Besides being captivated by the astonishing art on display I was also intrigued by the wall texts. Carefully chosen passages from Van Gogh's letters to his brother, in English translation, were quoted alongside many of the paintings. One quote in particular stayed with me. In it, Vincent, speaking about mortality, expressed his desire to leave some souvenir in the form of drawings or pictures. It's a notion that moved me then and years later became the basis for the final song in the cycle: Souvenir. But at the time it was merely a germ of an idea that I hoped I might utilize someday. The opportunity to do so came when Robert Cowles first approached me about writing a choral piece.

Sometimes I'm asked to give advice to composers regarding how they should go about choosing text to set to music. This is a subjective process, of course, but because writing a good song is such a challenge under any circumstances, I always advocate giving yourself every advantage right from the beginning. Why not choose material that moves you emotionally and perhaps even speaks to you personally in some way? As a composer (and a painter) who has struggled against the odds (as most artists do) there was no doubt about my feeling of connection.
to the letters. Finding the best method and musical language to translate their emotional content into song would be the next challenge.

So the question arises: how does one go about turning prose passages into song? First and foremost it is tremendously helpful to have some flexibility with the chosen texts. In the case of the Van Gogh letters, I chose the earliest English translation which is in the Public Domain. (I consulted with a copyright attorney who confirm their status and provided the legal language for their citation.) Secondly, to avoid confusion, I have been careful to subtitle the work as "based on the letters" as opposed to "from" or "set to." This language appears in the Delos CD materials, on this website, and on the printed music available for purchase as a downloadable PDF file. The words "based on" also appear in the legal footnote which identifies the source of the translation. All this may seem overly meticulous to some but it is important to establish how source materials are used. And flexibility with the text allowed me the freedom to weave passages together, play with the chronology, repeat certain words or phrases, and make editorial modifications such as the use of synonyms or the addition or deletion of certain phrases.

And yet, for all of that, I want to emphasize that "Dear Theo" stays very close to the chosen passages as originally translated. And where modifications were made I endeavored to stay as true as possible to the spirit of the text. Many sections are virtually word-for-word settings of the translation (the song "The Man I have to Paint is an example). Others were modified either to embody more of the meaning of an entire letter in a short song or to allow for a more symmetrical structure that could lend itself to the creation of a melody. A melody can be the most transformative conveyor of an emotional idea. So constructing a melody, while respecting its textual basis can, I believe, get closer to the truth than a verbatim setting of a translation that may or may not be entirely reliable in any case.

My "Dear Theo," of course, is a personal vision of only certain aspects of the letters. The correspondence is so large and rich that a myriad number of musical or artistic treatments are possible. I focused on the passages that moved me deeply and I am grateful that this song cycle as well as the choral piece have moved others as well.

Ben Moore
2014
APPENDIX D:
BEN MOORE’S RESEARCH IN TEXT SETTING

The Red Vineyard
song text:
Dear Theo, my brother, if only you had been there when I saw the red vineyard, all red like red wine, in the distance it turned to yellow, and then a green sky with the sun and the earth after the rain, violet, sparkling yellow here and there where it caught the reflection of the setting sun. Oh Theo, Brother, I think that I must have a starry night with cypresses in blue and yellow light, or surmounting a field, a field of ripe corn. Oh Theo, my brother, there are such wonderful nights here, such wonderful nights, such nights here, such wonderful, wonderful nights. I am in a continual fever of work. A fever of work!
I hope the weather is as fine in Paris as it is here. Write as soon as you can.
Ever yours, Vincent

Notated text:
"...dear Theo, [my brother*]...if only you had been [there]...when [I]... saw [the]... red vineyard, all red like red wine. In the distance it turned to yellow, and then a green sky with the sun, [and] the earth after the rain, violet, sparkling yellow here and there where it caught the reflection of the setting sun."¹ (November 1888)
"[Oh Theo, brother]...I [think that I] must...have a starry night with cypresses, [in blue and yellow light,] or...surmounting a field of ripe corn; there are such wonderful nights here. I am in a continual fever of work!"² (April 1888)
"I hope...[the weather is as] fine...in Paris as [it is] here....[Write as soon as you can.**]...
Ever yours, Vincent" (May 27, 1888)

3. vangoghletters.org, from letter dated May 27, 1888
*Vincent addresses Theo as "my brother" in other letters
**translated as "write to me at once," in vangoghletters.org

I Found a Woman
song text:
I found a woman, not young, not beautiful. But oh this woman, she had a charm for me. It's not the first time I was unable to resist that feeling of affection. Yes, affection and love for these women who are so damned and condemned. I do not condemn them. I do not condemn them. Would you think that I have never felt the need for love? Would you think that I have never felt the need for love? We talked about her life, about her cares, about her misery. We talked about everything, brother. Everything.

Notated text:
"...I found a woman, not young, not beautiful... [But] Oh! [this woman] she had a charm for me... [It's] not the first time...I was unable to resist that feeling of affection, yes affection and love for... [these] women who are so damned and condemned... I do not condemn them...Would you think that I have never felt the need for love?...we talked about... her life, about her cares, about her misery¹..." [We talked about everything, brother. Everything.*] (December 1881)
*the phrase "We talked about everything" appears earlier in the letter

**Little One**

*song text:*
Often I think of your little one, The-o, and what he means to you now in your life. Surely it's better to have a child than to expend all one's vigor as I have. Often I think of him there in his cradle. But for myself, I'm too old, too old to desire something else. Yet often I think of your baby, your baby. Oh Theo, I'm hard at work and still I say it's better by far to have a child. But, for myself, that desire was gone long ago. Long ago. Gone.*

*The song text above was loosely adapted from the following passage: “I often think of the little one. I think it is certainly better to bring up children than to give all your nervous energy to making pictures… but I am too old…to desire anything different…That desire has left me.” p. 338, "The Letters of Vincent van Gogh" edited by Mark Roskill, from last paragraph of letter dated July 1890.

**The Man I Have to Paint**

*song text:*
I think of the man I have to paint. Terrible in the furnace of the full ardors of the harvest at the heart of the south. Hence the orange shades like storm flashes vivid as red hot iron and hence the luminous tones of the old gold in the shadows. Oh my dear boy, and the nice people will only see the exaggeration as caricature! The only choice I have is between being a good painter and a bad one. I choose the first. But the needs of painting are like those of a ruinous mistress: you can do nothing without money. And you never have enough of it. If you should happen to send a little extra this month I would be most grateful.

*notated text:
"...I think of the man I have to paint, terrible in the furnace of the full ardours of harvest, at the heart of the south. Hence the orange shades like storm flashes, vivid as red hot iron, and hence the luminous tones of old gold in the shadows. Oh, my dear boy . . . and the nice people will only see the exaggeration as caricature…The only choice I have is between being a good painter and bad one. I choose the first. But the needs of painting are like those of a ruinous mistress, you can do nothing without money, and you never have enough of it'…"(August 1888)
[If you should happen to send a little extra this month I would be most grateful.]*

*Vincent often asked Theo, apologetically, for "extra" funds.

**When I’m at Work**

*song text:*
But when I'm at work I feel an unlimited faith in art and that I shall succeed. And when doubt overwhelms me I try to defeat it by setting to work once again. Poverty is at my back but I'm still at work. I'm still at work. Gauguin and I, our arguments are electric! Our arguments are electric! And when that delirium of mine shakes all I dearly love, I do not accept it as reality. I do not accept it! I do not accept it! I'm still at work. I'm still at work.
noted text:
“…[but] when I’m at work I feel an unlimited faith in art, and that I shall succeed…and [when]…
doubt overwhelms me… I try to [defeat it*] by setting to work [once again.**]† (July 1883)
“ Poverty is at my back…[but I’m still at work…***]” (December 1885)
“Gauguin and I…our arguments are… electric…” 2 (December 1888)
“And when that delirium of mine shakes…[all] I dearly love, I do not accept it as reality… [I’m
still at work.]” 3 (February 1889)

Already Broken

song text:
At times I feel already broken. And what will come of it I do not know. My deepest hope
remains the same as you well know, brother: that I might be a lighter burden in your life. But I
can see a time that's just on the horizon, a time when you might show my pictures with no
shame. It's true I'm often sick and troubled. But there is harmony inside of me. For in the poorest
little hut I see a picture. And I believe that very soon, yes very soon dear brother you will be
proud to show my work. You will be satisfied, I'm sure. You will have something for your
sacrifices, brother. Soon.
At times I feel already broken.

noted text:
“…And at times I feel already...broken, and… What will come of it I [do not*] know; [My
deepest hope remains the same as you well know, brother: that I might be a lighter burden in
your life.**] [But I can see a time that's just on the horizon, a time when you might show my
pictures with no shame.***]† (summer 1887)
[It's true I'm often sick and troubled. But there is harmony inside of me. For in the poorest little
hut I see a picture.****] [And I believe that very soon, yes very soon dear brother you will be
proud to show my work. You will be satisfied, I'm sure. You will have something for your
sacrifices, brother. Soon.*****] (July 1882)

*originally translated as "don't"
** originally translated as " I would like above all things to be less of a burden to you…"
*** originally translated as "I hope to make such progress that you will be able to show my stuff boldly without
compromising yourself."
****adapted from the following passage: "It is true that I am often in the greatest misery, but still there is within me
a calm pure harmony and music. In the poorest huts, in the dirtiest corner, I see drawings and pictures." p.156 "The
Letters of Vincent van Gogh" edited by Mark Roskill, from letter dated July 1882.
*****adapted from: "I do hope, brother, that within a few years, perhaps even now, little by little you will see things
by methat will give you some satisfaction for your sacrifices." p.156 “The Letters of Vincent van Gogh" edited by
Mark Roskill, from letter dated July 1882.
Souvenir

song text:
I must leave a souvenir, a souvenir that I might offer in the shape of some-thing true, the shape of drawings and of pictures. I must leave a souvenir, a souvenir that might remain to say to those who care to see, to those with eyes who care to see that this man felt deeply, that this man felt deeply. I know I'll never do what I intended. Success requires a nature unlike mine. My strength has been depleted far too quickly, far too quickly, but for others, Theo, yes for others, Theo, there is a chance. There is a chance for something more. There is a chance for something more. If only you had been there when I saw the red vineyard, all red like red wine. There is a chance, there is a chance, there is a chance for something more. A souvenir that might remain to say to those who care to see that here was someone who felt deeply, brother, dear brother, dear Theo.

Notated text:
[I must leave a souvenir, a souvenir that I might offer in the shape of some-thing true, the shape of drawings and of pictures. I must leave a souvenir, a souvenir that might remain to say to those who care to see, to those with eyes who care to see that this man felt deeply, that this man felt deeply.*] (August 1883 and July 1882)
[I know I'll never do what I intended. Success requires a nature unlike mine. My strength has been depleted far too quickly, far too quickly, but for others, Theo, yes for others, Theo, there is a chance. There is a chance for something more. There is a chance for something more.**] (September 1889)
"...if only you had been [there]...when [I]... saw [the]... red vineyard, all red like red wine.¹ (November 1888)
[There is a chance, there is a chance, there is a chance for something more. A souvenir that might remain to say to those who care to see that here was someone who felt deeply, brother, dear brother, dear Theo.***]

1. (Roskill, p.300. from letter dated ‘November 1888.’)
*adapted from the following two passages: “I…want to leave some souvenir in the shape of drawings or pictures…to express a sincere human feeling” (Roskill, p.202, first paragraph, from letter dated ‘August 1883.’) and "...I want to reach so far that people will say of my work: he feels deeply, he feels tenderly..." (Roskill, p.156, letter dated July 1882)
**adapted from the following passage: “To succeed, to have lasting prosperity, you must have a temperament different from mine; I shall never do what I might have done and ought to have wished and pursued…My strength has been exhausted too quickly but I see in the distance the possibility for others of doing an infinite number of fine things.” (Roskill, p.324 and 326 from letter dated ‘September 1889.’)
***see above references
APPENDIX E:
CATALOGUE

Opera

• *Enemies, a Love Story*

  A new opera based on Isaac Bashevis Singer’s novel of the same name. It tells the story of Herman Broder, a Polish Jew and survivor of Nazi persecution, living in New York in 1949. It is both a farcical, romantic comedy of a man juggling three women, and a dark story chronicling the legacy of the Holocaust. With a libretto by Nahma Sandrow, “Enemies” premiered at Palm Beach Opera on February 20, 2015.

• *Odyssey*

  Based on Homer's "The Odyssey," this one-hour opera for young people was commissioned by the Glimmerglass Festival and premiered there in 2015. Kelley Rourke wrote the libretto.

Choral Music

• *Dear Theo* (for SATB chorus)
• *The Lake Isle of Innisfree* (version for SATB chorus and piano)
• *When I was One-and-Twenty* (version for SATB chorus and piano)
• *In the dark pine-wood* (version for SATB chorus and piano)
• *Early Morning* (version for SATB chorus and piano)
• *When You Are Old* (version for SATB chorus and piano)
• *See How a Flower Blossoms* (version for SATB chorus and piano)

Chamber Music

• *The House on Kronenstrasse*

  A multi-media piece for piano, viola, clarinet and an actress created in collaboration with the author Shira Nayman. The piece consists of short movements interspersed and at times underscoring text from the first story in Nayman’s collection entitled “Awake in the Dark.”
Orchestral Music

- *Enemies Suite*
- *The Lake Isles of Innisfree* (version with orchestra)
- *I Am in Need of Music* (version with orchestra)
- *The Cloak, the Boat, and the Shoes* (version with orchestra)
- *This Heart that Flutters* (version with orchestra)

Song Cycles

- *Ode to a Nightingale*

Eight songs for baritone voice and piano set to the eight stanzas of John Keats’ poem. The work was commissioned by Bruce and Suzie Kovner in 2010.

1. My heart aches
2. O, for a draught
3. Fade far away
4. Away, away!
5. I cannot see what flowers
6. Darkling I listen
7. Thou wast not born for death
8. Adieu!

- *So Free Am I*

Seven songs for high soprano set to the text of women writers. Commissioned by the Marilyn Horne Foundation.

1. Mutta (text: anonymous songs of Buddhist nuns)
2. Interlude (text: Amy Lowell)
3. Orinda Upon Little Hector Philips (text: Katherine Philips - excerpt)
4. Nervous Prostration (text: Anna Wickham)
5. Social Note (text: Dorothy Parker)
6. The Poem as Mask - Orpheus (text: Muriel Rukeyser)
7. Mettika (text: anonymous songs of Buddhist nuns - excerpt)

- *Dear Theo*

Based on the first English translation of letters written by Vincent van Gogh to his brother Theo.
1. The Red Vineyard
2. I Found a Woman
3. Little One
4. The Man I Have to Paint
5. When I’m at Work
6. Already Broken
7. Souvenir

- *Love Remained*

Four songs based on texts concerning LGBT youth including transcripts from the “It Gets Better” video project and the “Hope Speech” of Harvey Milk. Commissioned by SongFusion in 2011.

1. Hold On (based on a speech by Joel Burns)
2. Uncle Ronnie (based on text by Randy Roberts Potts)
3. Love Remained (set to poem by Michael Kelly)
4. Hope (based on “Hope Speech” of Harvey Milk)

**Musical Theatre Pieces**

- *Henry and Company*

  Music and lyrics by Ben Moore
  Book and additional lyrics by Barry Kleinbort.

  Developed for tenor Jerry Hadley, "Henry and Company" is an intimate 4-character musical about a man returning to the small town of his youth. It was presented at the Appalachian Summer Music Festival in 2002.

- *Bye Bye Broadway*

  Music by Ben Moore
  Book and lyrics by Carl Ritchie.

  A farcical, fast-paced, backstage comedy with five characters.

- *The Bone Chandelier*

  Music by Ben Moore
  Book by Ellen Kushner
  Lyrics by Ben Moore and Ellen Kushner; Dramaturgs: Sara Berg and Delia Sherman.

  The show is in the ‘fantasy’ genre in the tradition of Tolkien and ‘Harry Potter’
Cabaret and Theater Songs

(Lyrics are by Ben Moore unless otherwise noted)

• Early Morning
• Who Can Say What Love Is?
• Don’t Walk Away
• See How A Flower Blossoms
• Look Around
• 'Tis the Season
• Let Me Explain
• Lonely Room
• Were I To Touch You
• I Can Hear Her Voice (lyric Marcy Heisler)
• He Mouths the Words (lyric Annie Dinerman)
• The Wonder of Our Lives
• The Mountains
• Pumpkin Time (lyric Adele Ahronheim)
• At Christmas Time
• Just Jane (lyric Carl Ritchie)
• Paris
• I Stand in the Rain
• How Can I Leave You?
• Let the Walls Fall Down Little Voice
• A Moment Like This (or Song for Our Wedding)
• Look at You
• The Happiest Couple
• One Christmas Morning
• Where Has Summer Gone?
• Good-bye Old Centerville
• A Fool to Want You
• Such a Strange World
• With You in My Life
• There
• Things’ll Work Out Fine
• The Time of My Life
• This Is Not My Day
• I Believe
• Let the World Wait
• What Can I Tell You?
• Same Old Smile (lyric Barry Kleinbort)
• Home For Christmas
Classical Songs

- *A Time to Begin* (based on a letter of Giuseppe Verdi)
- *The End* (text Wilfred Owen)
- *In the Dark Pinewood* (text James Joyce)
- *The Lake Isle of Innisfree* (text W.B. Yeats)
- *I Am in Need of Music* (text Elizabeth Bishop)
- *When I Was One-and-Twenty* (text A.E. Housman)
- *To the Virgins to Make Much of Time* (text Robert Herrick)
- *Darkling I Listen* (text John Keats)
- *Bright Cap and Streamers* (text James Joyce)
- *I Would in that Sweet Bosom Be* (text James Joyce)
- *The Ivy-wife* (text Thomas Hardy)
- *The Lover Pleads with His Friend for Old Friends* (text W. B. Yeats)
- *Annie Laurie* (text William Douglas)
- *This Heart That Flutters* (text James Joyce)
- *The Cloak, the Boat and the Shoes* (text W.B. Yeats)
- *On Music* (text Ben Moore)
- *Simples* (text James Joyce)
- *Ah, Happy Happy Boughs* (text John Keats)
- *Where Are the Songs of Spring* (text John Keats)
- *Crazy Jane Talks with the Bishop* (text W.B. Yeats)
- *When You Are Old* (text W.B. Yeats)
- *Hope Is the Thing With Feathers* (text Emily Dickinson)
- *Requiem* (text R.L. Stevenson)
- *Lullaby* (text Christina Rossetti)
- *Judith's River* (text Nahma Sandrow)
- *I Travel as a Phantom Now* (text Thomas Hardy)
- *I Want to go with the One that I Love* (based on text by Bertolt Brecht)
- *The Wild Swans at Coole* (text W.B. Yeats)
- *Sappho* (based on Sappho fragment "94" translated by Charles Beye)
- *The Taxi* (based on the poem by Amy Lowell)
- *John and Abigail* (based on letters of John and Abigail Adams)

Opera Parodies

- *Wagner Roles*
- *Sexy Lady*
- *I’m Glad I’m Not a Tenor*
- *Content To Be Behind Me*
- *We Love the Opera*
- *Song for Montserrat*
- *We’re Very Concerned*
- *The Audience Song*
- *You Are Not a Diva*
- *I Love Teaching Voice*
Hi Greg,
Those time periods on Sunday, Monday and Tuesday are all doable. What time would be best for you? Let's Skype. My Skype name [left out for privacy’s sake]
No need to send questions to me beforehand but I would like to review the transcription of the interview at some point and possibly make some changes.
You have my permission to reprint samples of the score as you wish.
Talk to you soon!
Ben
VITA

Gregory Gallagher was born in upstate New York and was raised in Dayton, Ohio where he remained until college. He received his Bachelor of Music in Vocal Performance at Cedarville University in 2011. Mr. Gallagher then moved to Baton Rouge to study with esteemed tenor Robert Grayson and attend Louisiana State University. He was awarded a Master of Music in Vocal Performance in 2013. He continued at LSU as a doctoral candidate and teaching assistant. While at LSU, Mr. Gallagher has taught undergraduate level courses in Voice as well as all of the undergraduate Diction courses in French, German, and Italian.

During his time at LSU, Mr. Gallagher has performed in numerous roles both for LSU opera and abroad. His operatic credits include, Lindoro (L’Italiana in Algeri), Beadle (Sweeney Todd), Don Ottavio (Don Giovanni), St. Brioche (The Merry Widow), Ferrando (Così fan tutte), Fenton (Falstaff), Peter Quint (The Turn of the Screw), Lysander (A Midsummer Night’s Dream), Rinuccio (Gianni Schicchi), and the Podestà (La finta giardiniera). He is the recipient of a 2016 Metropolitan Opera Council Auditions Encouragement Award. Other awards include the Mu Phi Epsilon Scholarship, the LSU Voice/Opera Scholarship, and the Paul Groves Vocal Scholarship. Mr. Gallagher will receive his Doctor of Musical Arts in Vocal Performance with a minor in Vocal Pedagogy in May and upon graduation will pursue opportunities in teaching and performing.