

# open house

Song cycles by Robert Beaser and William Bolcom



Paul Sperry, Tenor

The New York Virtuosi/

Kenneth Klein

The St. Paul Chamber Orchestra/

Dennis Russell Davies

## SONGS FROM THE OCCASIONS

*Songs from The Occasions* is a song cycle for tenor and chamber ensemble set to six poems of the Italian Nobel Laureate, Eugenio Montale. Selected from his epoch-making volume of poems entitled *Le Occasioni* (1934-39), all but the final poem in the cycle (*Cave D'Autunno*) are part of the section, "I Motetti." Although these dense, imagistic, almost hermetic poems have been described as being prophetic of the impending disaster looming over Europe in the pre-World War II era, they are also, in the more immediate sense, love poems written to the mystery woman Clizia, whom fate seems to have prematurely separated from the poet after a brief but intense liaison. As viewed from either of these two levels, the poems represent a powerful, searching voice in a world awash with turmoil and disarray.

The identity of the mysterious Clizia has long been a subject of speculation, but it was not until early 1986 that the secret was revealed. Before his death in 1981, Montale confided to his friend Glauco Cambon that Clizia was actually the poet and translator, Irma Brandeis. Cambon, in turn, only recently made this fact public. Coincidentally, it is Irma Brandeis' translation that is used in the final song of this cycle.

*Songs from The Occasions* was commissioned by Leonard Slatkin and the Saint Louis Symphony Orchestra through a Nonesuch Commission Award. It was begun in September, 1984, at the American Academy in Rome and completed in Katonah, New York in April, 1985. It is scored for flute, clarinet, horn, violin, viola, cello and piano. The outer two songs are in translation while the middle four are in the original Italian. It was premiered in May, 1985 by Paul Sperry, tenor, and members of the Saint Louis Symphony conducted by the composer.

— Robert Beaser

### Motet I

You know it: I should renounce you and I cannot.  
With trigger sureness, everything confounds me:

Each action, every cry, and even  
From the piers the salty breath that,  
Overflowing, makes the somber springtime  
Of Sottoripa.

Region of iron, region of masts that stand  
A forest in the dust of evening.  
And from the open spaces a protracted buzzing  
Rasps like a nail upon the windowpane. I seek  
The lost and only sign, the pledge, redemptive,  
that I had  
From you.

And hell is certain.

(Maurice English)

### Motetto IV

Lontano, ero con te quando tuo padre  
entrò nell'ombra e ti lasciò il suo addio.  
Che seppi fino allora? Il logorio  
*di prima* mi salvò per questo:

che t'ignoravo e non dovevo: ai colpi  
d'oggi lo so, se di laggiù s'inflette  
un'ora e mi riporta Cumerlotti  
o Anghébèni—tra scoppi di spolette  
e i lamenti e l'accorer delle squadre.

### Motetto I

Lo sai: debbo riperderti e non posso.  
Come un tiro aggiustato mi sommuove

ogni opera, ogni grido e anche lo spiro  
salino che straripa  
dai mole fa l'oscura primavera  
di Sottoripa.

Paese de ferrame e alberature  
a selva nella polvere del vespro.  
Un ronzio lungo viene dall'aperto,  
strazia com'unghia ai vertri. Cerco il segno  
smarrito, il pegno solo chèbbi in grazia  
da te.

E l'inferno è certo.

### Motet IV

Long ago, I was with you when your father  
died, leaving you only his farewell.  
That long wearing away saved me  
only for this:

I ignored you and shouldn't have: from today's  
blows I know; if from down there one hour  
bends and brings me back Cumerlotti  
or Anghébèni—among explosions of fuses  
and wails and the scattering of the squads.

(Charles Wright)

**Motetto V**

Addii, fischi nel buio, cenni, tosse  
e sportelli abbassati. È l'ora. Forse  
gli automi hanno ragione. Come appaiono  
dai corridoi, murati!

--Presti anche tu alla fioca  
litanià del tuo rapido quest'orrida  
e fedele cadenza di carioca?—

**Motetto IX**

Il ramarro, se scocca  
sotto la grande fersa  
dalle stoppie—

la vela, quando fiotta  
e s'inabissa al salto  
della rocca—

il cannone di mezzodi  
piú fioco del tuo cuore  
e il cronometro se  
scatta senza rumore—

e poi? Luce di lampo

invano può mutarvi in alcunché  
di ricco e strano. Altro era il tuo stampo.

**Motet V**

Good-byes, whistles in the dark, gestures, coughing  
and lowered windows. It's time. Maybe  
the robots are right. How they loom  
from the corridors, walled in!

--Do you, too, lend to the faint litany  
of the trains this grotesque  
and faithful carioca?

(Charles Wright)

**Motet IX**

The emerald lizard, if it darts out  
of the straw, under the flail  
of scorching drought—

the sail, when it lists  
and plunges in the waves' abyss  
at the outcropping rock—

the noon cannon, fainter  
than your heart, and the clock  
which strikes the hour  
and from it no sound issues—

and then? In vain the thunder's glint

transforms you into something rich and strange.  
Different was your imprint.

(Edith Farnsworth)

**Motetto XVI**

Il fiore che ripete  
dall'orlo del burrato  
non scordarti di me,  
non ha tinte piú liete né piú chiare  
dello spazio gettato tra me e te.

Un cigolío si sferra, ci discosta,  
l'azzurro pervicace non ricompare.  
Nell'afa quasi visibile mi riporta all'opposta  
tappa, già buia, la funicolare.

**Autumn Cellars**

On which descends the lunar spring,  
haloes with light chipped jugs,  
cleft pine cones, dazzlement  
of drying nets, splinters of wood.

There will return, there will return across the frost  
the bounty of a hand;  
and there will ford the distant sky  
again the luminous horde that sacks the heart.

(Irma Brandeis)

**Motet XVI**

The flower that repeats  
from the edge of the crevasse  
forget me not,  
has no tints fairer or more blithe  
than the space tossed here between you and me.

A clank of metal gears puts us apart.  
The stubborn azure fades. In a pall of air  
grown almost visible, the funicular  
carries me to the opposite stage. The dark is there.

(Irma Brandeis)

**Cave d'Autunno**

su cui discende la primavera lunare  
e nimbi di candore ogni frastaglio,  
schianti di pigne, abbaglio  
di reti stese e schegge,

ritornerà ritornerà sul gelo  
la bontà d'una mano,  
varcherà il cielo lontano  
la ciurma luminosa che ci saccheggia.

**ROBERT BEASER** has emerged as one of the most accomplished creative musicians of his generation. Since 1982, when the New York Times wrote that he possessed a “lyrical gift comparable to that of the late Samuel Barber,” his music has won international acclaim for its balance between dramatic sweep and architectural clarity. He is often cited as an important figure among the “New Tonalists,” composers who are adopting new tonal grammar to their own uses, and through a wide range of media has established his own language as a synthesis of Western tradition and American vernacular.

Born in Boston, Massachusetts, Beaser studied literature, political philosophy and music at Yale College, graduating summa cum laude, Phi Beta Kappa in 1976. He went on to earn his Master of Music, M.M.A. and Doctor of Musical Arts degrees from the Yale School of Music. His principal composition teachers have included Jacob Druckman, Earle Brown, Toru Takemitsu, Arnold Franchetti, Yehudi Wyner and Goffredo Petrassi. In addition, he studied conducting with Otto-Werner Mueller, and William Steinberg at Yale, and composition with Betsy Jolas on a Crofts Fellowship at Tanglewood in 1976. From 1978-1990 he served as co-Music Director and Conductor of the innovative contemporary chamber ensemble Musical Elements at the 92nd Street Y, bringing premieres of over two hundred works to Manhattan. From 1988-1993 he was the Meet the Composer/Composer-in-Residence with the American Composers Orchestra at Carnegie Hall, and now serves as ACO's Artistic Director. Since 1993, Beaser has been Professor and Chairman of the Composition Department at the Juilliard School in New York.

Beaser's compositions have earned him numerous awards and honors. At the age of 16, his first orchestral work was performed by the Greater Boston Youth Symphony under his own direction at Jordan Hall in Boston. In 1977 he became the youngest composer to win the Prix de Rome from the American Academy in Rome. In 1986,

Beaser's widely heard Mountain Songs was nominated for a Grammy Award in the category of Best Contemporary Composition. He has received fellowships from the Guggenheim and Fulbright Foundations, the National Endowment for the Arts, the Goddard Lieberston Fellowship from the American Academy of Arts and Letters, a Charles Ives Scholarship, an ASCAP Composers Award, a Nonesuch Commission Award and a Barlow Commission. In 1995, the American Academy of Arts and Letters honored him with their lifetime achievement award.

Beaser's music has been performed and commissioned with regularity both in America and abroad. He has received major commissions from the New York Philharmonic the Chicago Symphony, the Saint Louis Symphony, The American Composers Orchestra, The Baltimore Symphony and Dawn Upshaw, The Minnesota Orchestra, Chanticleer, New York City Opera, Glimmerglass, and WNET/Great Performances among others. His music is featured on commercial recordings released on many record labels including London/Argo, Milken Archives, New World Records, EMI-Electrola, Koch, Siemens and innova.



## OPEN HOUSE

**THEODORE ROETHKE** (1908-1963), born in Saginaw, Michigan, attended the University of Michigan and Harvard; an English professor and sometime tennis coach, he taught variously at Penn State, Bennington College, and finally in Seattle at the University of Washington. Several collections of his poetry, published from 1941 on, were widely acclaimed. *The Waking* won the 1953 Pulitzer Prize and two other volumes won National Book Awards. More important, his audience transcended the usual literary coterie, and a comprehensive *Collected Poems*, posthumously published by Doubleday in 1966, has enhanced his reputation as one of the most significant English language poets of the 20th century.

I was a member of Theodore Roethke's poetry-writing class at the University of Washington in 1956-7; I did not study with him with any ambition to become a practicing poet, only to try to learn how to set words to music. Roethke was not an easy man to know, but his artistic struggle and evolution seem familiar to me—perhaps even similar to my own. In his earlier years, Roethke adopted an avant-garde, almost stream-of-consciousness “Freudian” style (see for example “Give Way, Ye Gates,” portions of which are used in *Open House*); later, he was to become more and more classically oriented, using such ancient poetic forms as the sestina and villanelle—although a respect for the works of the past is already obvious in his first publications.

*Open House*, commissioned by the American Choral Foundation and written for the tenor Paul Sperry, is a cycle of seven Roethke poems in roughly chronological order, dating from the 1930s to the end of the poet's life. Both “Open House” and “Give Way, Ye Gates”—the first and second songs of my cycle—employ a musical style that could now almost be called “classical expressionism.” “The Waking,” one of Roethke's deepest and most famous poems, is both poetically and musically a return to earlier



forms; “The Serpent” is one of his many lighter pieces, often written side by side with some of his most searching, painfully exploratory verse. If one poem of Roethke’s is known almost universally, it must be “I Knew a Woman;” its mixture of Restoration elegance of form and ‘30s pop-lyrics diction, sincere and winking at the same time, evokes a similar musical response in the setting.

The last poems of the cycle celebrate an arrival at a sort of peace—“the true ease of myself,” as Roethke expressed it in another poem—which, even if he may not have experienced it fully in his personal life, he touched upon with profound knowledge in his poetry. I have used only the beginning of his long piece “Meditations of an Old Woman” for the sixth song of the cycle, but enough, I hope, to convey the contradictions in mood that make the work so emotionally convincing: the bitterness of old age interlarded with its wisdom. “The Right Thing,” a villanelle like “The Waking,” marks a 180-degree turn from the unresolved, bitter passion of “Open House;” here I tried to evoke the feeling one experiences at the final chorale of a Bach cantata—the stately completion of a work, of a life.

—William Bolcom

*Open House*  
*Poems by Theodore Roethke*

**Open House**

My secrets cry aloud.  
I have no need for tongue.  
My heart keeps open house,  
My doors are widely swung.  
An epic of the eyes  
My love, with no disguise.

My truths are all foreknown,  
This anguish self-revealed.  
I'm naked to the bone,  
With nakedness my shield.  
Myself is what I wear:  
I keep the spirit spare.

The anger will endure,  
The deed will speak the truth  
In language strict and pure.  
I stop the lying mouth:  
Rage warps my clearest cry  
To witless agony.

**Give Way, Ye Gates**

Believe me, knot of gristle, I bleed like a tree;  
I dream of nothing but boards;  
I could love a duck.  
Such music in a skin!  
A bird sings in the bush of your bones.  
Tufty, the water's loose.  
Bring me a finger. This dirt's lonesome for grass.  
Are the rats dancing? The cats are.

And you, cat after great milk and vasty fishes,  
A moon loosened from a stag's eye,  
Twiced me nicely,--  
In the green of my sleep,  
In the green.  
Mother of blue and the many changes of hay,  
This tail hates a flat path.  
I've let my nose out;  
I could melt down a stone,--  
How is it with the long birds?  
May I look too, loved eye?  
It's a wink beyond the world.  
In the slow rain, who's afraid?  
We're king and queen of the right ground.  
I'll risk the winter for you.  
You child with a beast's heart,  
Make me a bird or a bear!  
I've played with the fishes  
Among the unwrinkling ferns  
In the wake of a ship of wind;  
But now the instant ages,  
And my thought hunts another body.  
I'm sad with the little owls.  
You tree beginning to know,  
You whisper of kidneys,  
We'll swinge the instant!--  
With jots and jogs and cinders on the floor;  
The sea will be there, the great squashy shadows,  
Biting themselves perhaps;  
The shrillest frogs;  
And the ghost of some great howl  
Dead in a wall.  
In the high-noon of thighs,  
In the springtime of stones,  
We'll stretch with the great stems.  
We'll be at the business of what might be  
Looking toward what we are.

## The Waking

I wake to sleep, and take my waking slow.  
I feel my fate in what I cannot fear.  
I learn by going where I have to go.

We think by feeling. What is there to know?  
I hear my being dance from ear to ear.  
I wake to sleep, and take my waking slow.

Of those so close beside me, which are you?  
God bless the Ground! I shall walk softly there,  
And learn by going where I have to go.

Light takes the Tree; but who can tell us how?  
The lowly worm climbs up a winding stair;  
I wake to sleep, and take my waking slow.

Great Nature has another thing to do  
To you and me, so take the lively air,  
And, lovely, learn by going where to go.

This shaking keeps me steady. I should know.  
What falls away is always. And is near.  
I wake to sleep, and take my waking slow.  
I learn by going where I have to go.

## The Serpent

There was a Serpent who had to sing.  
There was. There was.  
He simply gave up Serpentine.  
Because. Because.  
He didn't like his Kind of Life;  
He couldn't find a proper Wife;  
He was a Serpent with a soul;

He got no Pleasure down his Hole.  
And so, of course, he had to Sing,  
And Sing he did, like Anything!  
The Birds, they were, they were Astounded;  
And various Measures Propounded  
To stop the Serpent's Awful Racket:  
They bought a Drum. He wouldn't Whack it.  
They sent, —you always send, —to Cuba  
And got a Most Commodious Tuba;  
They got a Horn, they got a Flute,  
But Nothing would suit.  
He said, "Look, Birds, all this is futile:  
I do not like to Bang or Tootle."  
And then he cut loose with a Horrible Note  
That practically split the Top of his Throat.  
"You see," he said, with a Serpent's Leer,  
"I'm Serious about my Singing Career!"  
And the Woods Resounded with many a Shriek  
As the Birds flew off to the end of Next Week.

## I Knew a Woman

I knew a woman, lovely in her bones,  
When small birds sighed, she would sigh back at them;  
Ah, when she moved, she moved more ways than one:  
The shapes a bright container can contain!  
Of her choice virtues only gods should speak,  
Or English poets who grew up on Greek  
(I'd have them sing in a chorus, cheek to cheek).

How well her wishes went! She stroked my chin,  
She taught me Turn, and Counter-turn, and Stand;  
She taught me Touch, that undulant white skin;  
I nibbled meekly from her proffered hand;

She was the sickle; I, poor I, the rake,  
Coming behind her for her pretty sake  
(But what prodigious mowing we did make).

Love likes a gander, and adores a goose:  
Her full lips pursed, the errant notes to sieze;  
She played it quick, she played it light and loose;  
My eyes, they dazzled at her flowing knees;  
Her several parts could keep a pure repose,  
Or one hip quiver with a mobile nose  
(She moved in circles, and those circles moved).

Let seed be grass, and grass turn into hay:  
I'm martyr to a motion not my own;  
What's freedom for? To know eternity.  
I swear she cast a shadow white as stone.  
But who would count eternity in days?  
These old bones live to learn her wanton ways:  
(I measure time by how a body sways).

**First Meditation**  
from "Meditation of an Old Woman"

On love's worst ugly day,  
The weeds hiss at the edge of the field,  
The small winds make their chilly indictments.  
Elsewhere, in houses, even pails can be sad;  
While stones loosen on the obscure hillside,  
And a tree tilts from its roots,  
Toppling down an embankment  
The spirit moves, but not always upward,  
While animals eat to the north,  
And the shale slides an inch in the talus,  
The bleak wind eats at the weak plateau,  
And the sun brings joy to some.  
But the rind, often, hates the life within.

How can I rest in the days of my slowness?  
I've become a strange piece of flesh,  
Nervous and cold, bird-furtive, whiskey,  
With a cheek soft as a hound's ear.  
What's left is light as a seed;  
I need an old crow's knowing.  
Often I think of myself as riding  
Alone, on a bus through western country.  
I sit above the back wheels, where the jolts are  
hardest,  
And we bounce and sway along toward the mid-  
night,  
The lights tilting up, skyward, as we come over a  
little rise,  
Then down, as we roll like a boat from a wave-crest.  
All journeys, I think, are the same:  
The movement is forward, after a few wavers,  
And for a while we are all alone,  
Busy, obvious with ourselves,  
The drunken soldier, the old lady with her pep-  
permints;  
And we ride, we ride, taking the curves  
Somewhat closer, the trucks coming  
Down from behind the last ranges,  
Their black shapes breaking past;  
And the air claps between us,  
Blasting the frosted windows,  
And I seem to go backward,  
Backward in time:  
Two song sparrows, one within a greenhouse,  
Shuttling its throat while perched on a wind-vent,  
And another, outside, in the bright day,  
With a wind from the west and the trees all in  
motion.  
One sang, then the other,  
The songs tumbling over and under the glass,

And the men beneath them wheeling in dirt to the  
cement benches,  
The laden wheelbarrows creaking and swaying,  
And the up-spring of the plank when a foot left the  
runway.

Journey within a journey:

The ticket mislaid or lost, the gate  
Inaccessible, the boat always pulling out  
From the rickety wooden dock,  
The children waving;

Or two horses plunging in snow, their lines tangled,  
A great wooden sleigh careening behind them,  
Swerving up a steep embankment.

For a moment they stand above me,  
Their black skins shuddering:  
Then they lurch forward,  
Lunging down a hillside.

## **The Right Thing**

Let others probe the mystery if they can.  
Time-harried prisoners of Shall and Will-  
The right thing happens to the happy man.

The bird flies out, the bird flies back again;  
The hill becomes the valley, and is still;  
Let others delve that mystery if they can.

God bless the roots!-Body and soul are one!  
The small become the great, the great the small;  
The right thing happens to the happy man.

Child of the dark, he can out leap the sun,  
His being single, and that being all:  
The right thing happens to the happy man.

Or he sits still, a solid figure when  
The self-destructive shake the common wall;  
Takes to himself what mystery he can,

And, praising change as the slow night comes on,  
Wills what he would, surrendering his will  
Till mystery is no more: No more he can.  
The right thing happens to the happy man.

National Medal of Arts, Pulitzer Prize, and Grammy Award-winner **WILLIAM BOLCOM** (born May 26, 1938) is an American composer of chamber, operatic, vocal, choral, cabaret, ragtime, and symphonic music.

Born in Seattle, Washington, he began composition studies at the age of 11 with George Frederick McKay and John Verall at the University of Washington while continuing piano lessons with Madame Berthe Poncy Jacobson. He later studied with Darius Milhaud at Mills College while working on his Master of Arts degree, with Leland Smith at Stanford University while working on his D.M.A., and with Olivier Messiaen and Milhaud at the Paris Conservatoire, where he received the 2ème Prix de Composition.

He joined the faculty of the University of Michigan's School of Music in 1973, was named the Ross Lee Finney Distinguished University Professor of Composition in 1994, and retired in 2008 after 35 years. Bolcom won the Pulitzer Prize for music in 1988 for *12 New Etudes for Piano*, and his setting of William Blake's *Songs of Innocence* and *Songs of Experience* on the Naxos label won four Grammy Awards in 2005.

As a composer, Bolcom has written four violin sonatas; eight symphonies; three operas (*McTeague*, *A View from the Bridge* and *A Wedding*), plus several musical theater operas; eleven string quartets; two film scores (*Hester Street* and *Illuminata*); incidental music for stage plays, including Arthur Miller's *Broken Glass*; fanfares and occasional pieces; and an extensive catalogue of chamber and vocal works.



## CREDITS

Nonesuch Credits:

*Open House* recorded for Nonesuch Records by

The Saint Paul Chamber Orchestra conducted by Dennis Russell Davies

Paul Sperry – Tenor

publ. E.B. Marks Music Corporation

recorded with the assistance of the Ford Foundation Recording Publication Program

engineering & musical supervision/Marc J. Aubort, Joanna Nickrenz (Elite Recordings, Inc.)

mastering/Robert C. Ludwig. A Dolby-system recording

recorded November 11 & 12, 1975 at the House of Hope Presbyterian Church St. Paul, Minnesota

*Open House* was originally recorded for Nonesuch Records and is released under license from Nonesuch Records.

coordinator/Teresa Sterne

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*Open House*, published by Edward B. Marks Music Corporation (BMI)

*Songs from The Occasions*, published by Schott Helicon Music Corporation

*Songs from The Occasions* was recorded on April 13, 1998 at the American Academy of Arts and Letters.

Adam Abeshouse- Producer/ Engineer

Andy Ryder- Assistant Engineer

[www.abeshouseproductions.com](http://www.abeshouseproductions.com)

Sperry photo by Brian Hatton

Cover image by Paul Sperry

Innova is supported by an endowment from the McKnight Foundation.

Philip Blackburn: director, design

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**PAUL SPERRY** is recognized as one of today's outstanding interpreters of American music. Although he is equally at home in a repertoire that extends from Monteverdi opera and the Bach Passions to Britten's "Nocturne" and hundreds of songs in more than a dozen languages, he brings to American music a conviction and an enthusiasm that has brought it to life for countless listeners. Sperry has world premieres of works by more than forty Americans to his credit including Leonard Bernstein, Robert Beaser, William Bolcom, Victoria Bond, Tom Cipullo, Daron Hagen, John Musto, Libby Larsen, Rob Paterson, Stephen Paulus, and Louise Talma. He created Jacob Druckman's "Animus IV" for the opening of the Centre Georges Pompidou at Beaubourg in Paris in 1977, and Bernard Rands' Pulitzer Prize winning "Canti del Sole" with the New York Philharmonic in 1983 under Zubin Mehta. He has recorded many CDs of American song and chamber music for various labels. He teaches courses in American song at the Manhattan School of Music, and the Brooklyn College Conservatory of Music, was formerly president of the American Music Center, and served as Chairman of the Board of the American Composers Orchestra for seven years. Since 1987 he has been the Director of Joy In Singing, an organization dedicated to helping young singers and American composers. In the summer of 2006 he delivered the keynote address at the annual convention of the National Association of Teachers of Singer – his subject was the delights of singing new American music.



## ROBERT BEASER

Songs from "The Occasions"  
of Eugenio Montale (1985)

- |   |                                  |      |
|---|----------------------------------|------|
| 1 | Motet I "The Pledge"             | 5:29 |
| 2 | Motet IV "Lontano, ero con te"   | 4:39 |
| 3 | Motet V "Addii, fischi nel buio" | 2:39 |
| 4 | Motet IX "Il ramarro, se scocca" | 3:30 |
| 5 | Motet XVI "Il fiore che ripete"  | 4:46 |
| 6 | "Autumn Cellars"                 | 3:18 |

*Paul Sperry, Tenor*  
*The New York Virtuosi,*  
*Kenneth Klein, Conductor*

## WILLIAM BOLCOM

"Open House" (1975)

A Song Cycle

for Tenor and Chamber Orchestra  
to Seven Poems by Theodore Roethke

- |    |  |      |
|----|--|------|
| 7  | Open House   | 2:13 |
| 8  | Give Way, Ye Gates                                       | 4:03 |
| 9  | The Waking   | 6:55 |
| 10 | The Serpent  | 2:44 |
| 11 | I Knew a Woman   | 4:24 |
| 12 | First Meditation (from<br>"Meditations of an Old Woman") | 8:08 |
| 13 | The Right Thing  | 4:59 |

*Paul Sperry, Tenor*  
*The St. Paul Chamber Orchestra,*  
*Dennis Russell Davies, Conductor*

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