



AN INTERVIEW WITH DAVID EVAN THOMAS

By Abbie Betinis
Composer-in-Residence

I met David Evan Thomas in early 2004, when I crashed a party to which he had been officially invited. I remember as Jocelyn and I went in to shake his hand I was nervous about meeting somebody “famous” and wondered to myself, “How many serious questions can I ask this guy at a party?”

His reputation certainly preceded him. At the time, he was composer-in-residence with The Schubert Club (1997-2005), and his works had been – and continue to be – premiered by well-known Twin Cities musicians, such as Maria Jette, The Rose Ensemble, and the Minnesota Orchestra. He studied composition at Eastman with Samuel Adler, and, here at the University of Minnesota, with Dominick Argento. His catalog includes work for instrumental and vocal soloists, chorus, orchestra, and a variety of chamber ensembles.

Since meeting him four years ago, I’ve had a chance to become more familiar with his music. At every hearing I am reminded why it is so effective when a composer takes the time to craft a composition, to define a structure and then to support it with counterpoint and harmony, and to imbue each line with warmth and purpose. While each of his works is unique, his catalog is unified by that inevitable “Thomas” trademark of fine craft.

Now that we know each other better, I had no qualms at all about asking him all the serious questions I could think of – all under the guise of this interview of course. He graciously spoke to me at length at a café near his home in Minneapolis. Excerpts follow.

Abbie Betinis (AB): *Why do you compose?*

David Evan Thomas (DET): For me, everything I do in my life is dictated by temperament. That means I’m happy and productive when I’m operating within my comfort zone. And I’ve discovered, through composition, that I like being alone, that I like losing track of time, and that I have an introverted temperament, whereas I had always been led to believe I was an extrovert. Even though I was a trumpet player – and trumpet players are expected to “nail things to the wall” – I was never going

to be happy as a trumpet player.

With composition, I feel I can take my time. I can deliberate, make choices. The process... of approving this and discarding that... is a process by which I inevitably create the boundaries of my life. Gradually, over time, and a lot of blind alleys, and attempts to go other directions, I’ve come back to this existence which is pretty narrow in its scope, but when I’m within it I’m very satisfied.

AB: *As much as I’ve heard you talk about controlled aspects of your compositional process, I really feel a sense of play in your music. Is that hard to balance?*

DET: No... play IS the balance. Music that plays is balanced, just as a ball that bounces observes physical laws. What **doesn’t** play is when music is too tightly controlled. That’s one of the reasons that I steered away from serial music: too much control and not enough play.

AB: *Your catalog includes work for so many different types of ensembles. When you sit down to write a choral piece, what’s unique?*

DET: The first thing is that it’s an expression of the text. So that sets the frame. The text dictates quite a bit: the timescale of the piece... to some extent the musical language...

AB: *I think of your vocal lines as always in service to the text. How did you hone your text-setting skills?*

DET: I got nailed on that pretty early. My first composition teacher, David Russell Williams, had done a lot of opera coaching, so when he sat down at the piano with a piece of vocal music, he’d speak it through as if the vocal lines were highlighted... he’d sing, “The staaars will a-waaaaa-ken, and the moooooo sleeeeps ...” with the kind of exaggeration of an almost Sprechstimme fashion.

AB: *I notice that you use a lot of classic texts. Why?*

DET: I use classic texts because they’re metrically musical, rich in imagery, and they don’t have the kinds of idiosyncrasies that modern poetry has in trying to be like regular speech. Classic texts are more heightened. They are deliberately under tension because of the meter and the rhyme. I like setting free verse too, but it poses different kinds of problems.

AB: *You've worked closely with Dominick Argento, who prefers to set prose.*

DET: Right. In that case, *he* is able to provide the tension. And I think that's what he likes – the fact that the prose is slack. So he's able to erect the kinds of metric and rhythmic tension he needs to make his lines dance.

AB: *That makes sense.*

DET: One difference between Dominick's setting of text and my setting – is that I am more traditional in the way I use the underpinnings – either accompaniment, or rhythmic structure – whereas he tries to achieve the same kind of rhythm that the text would have when spoken. I've found, oddly enough, that I'm just more of a traditionalist.

AB: *How does your experience as a choral singer function in your writing? Do you sing your vocal lines through as you're writing?*

DET: Oh yes... I'm a male voice, but I'm not really a baritone, tenor or bass. By quality I'm a tenor. By laziness I'm a baritone! But because I have no real identity as a choral singer, I can conceive of vocal lines that are probably more wide-ranging than a singer of a certain fach would conceive... more elastic.

AB: *Tell me the story of "The keen stars were twinkling" and the larger piece it comes from.*

DET: The larger piece was commissioned by Geneva Eschweiler, who wanted something to celebrate her legacy in Fergus Falls, where she taught for over 30 years. She left the text completely open to me, but the strictures were that it was to be performed by a community chorus plus the Fergus Falls College Choir. Since Geneva was a choral conductor, I developed a 15-minute piece in praise of singing called *Singers to Come*.

The keen stars were twinkling is the second poem of four. A prologue extends on either side, functioning like the cover of a book, containing the other poems within it.

AB: *That's such a nice idea. Tell me about the text.*

DET: Well, *The keen stars were twinkling* is one of [Percy Bysshe] Shelley's "Jane" poems, one of a number of poems to Jane Williams. The details of their relationship are a little unclear, but he seemed to regard her as a spirit of peace within their circle of friends. I do know also that at one point he presented her with a guitar...

I had been reading a lot of Shelley in the mid-1990s for a different project – a vocal quartet with piano – and there were four Janes in my life. So I liked the idea of setting a poem about Jane, and using Jane's name.

AB: *Would you comment on the dialogue between the piano and the chorus?*

DET: I do write for unaccompanied chorus a lot, but in some ways I prefer writing choral art song [i.e. accompanied by piano] because I think the voice needs something with more "attack" to set it into relief. The problem of a concert of choral music for me is one of contrast. The sonority is just a little bit too homogeneous.

Strings are really the ideal for me. Those instruments have different options to achieve varieties of attack. *A cappella* choruses do too, to some extent, but either it's the text that's doing it – which is a great way, of course – or there has to be a particular kind of dynamism in the singing itself.

AB: *Do you have a particular choral sound in your mind when you write for chorus?*

DET: I sang in a wonderful chorus at Northwestern University, the Alice Millar Chapel Choir – a 60-voice choir with quite a few "ringers" hired from the Chicago area. We did remarkable repertoire: the complete Rachmaninoff *Vespers*, Schoenberg's *Friede auf Erden* ... In a sense I have that in my mind, but my model doesn't actually come from the choral world. My first love is the orchestra, so when I write for chorus I think of it orchestrally.

AB: *Did you choose Minnesota for its new music?*

DET: No, I chose it because of Dominick Argento, but I was aware of the new music scene, and I had a sense that I would fit in – or at least fit in eventually.

The thing you find in Minnesota is that the audiences are, first of all, very smart, and second, fairly conservative. That's not something to fight with. In fact, that's part of what the change in my style was about. The music I was writing up until even 10 years ago is very different. But I feel perfectly happy here. The concert-going environment is very rich. If you want to write "Bang on a Can," go to New York.

AB: *Thanks so much for speaking with me, David.*

DET: Thanks, Abbie. I'm happy to be included on this imaginative program.