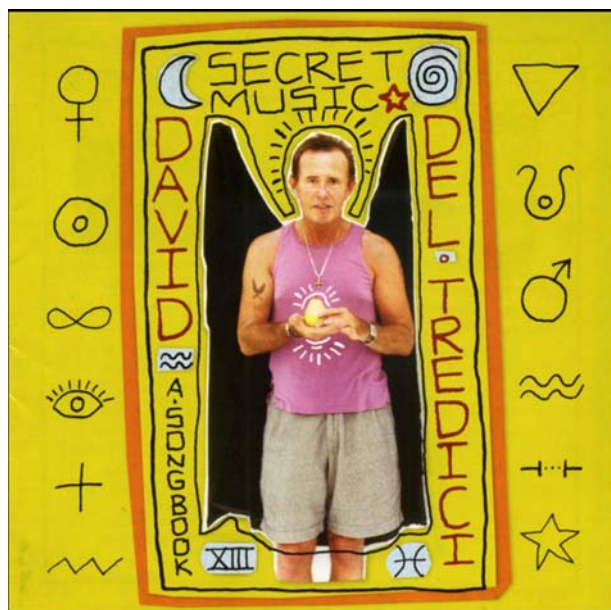


NWCR878

David Del Tredici

Secret Music – A Songbook



Miz Inez Sez (32:03)

1. *Alive and Taking Names* (3:49)
2. *The Happy Child* (6:25)

3. *Good News! Nilda is Back* (9:53)
4. *The Beckoning* (5:23)
5. *Chateaufeuf du Pape, the Pope's Valet Speaks* (6:33)

Hila Plitmann, soprano;
David Del Tredici, piano

3 Baritone Songs (22:18)

6. *Quietness* (7:17)
7. *Drinking Song* (6:29)
8. *Matthew Shepard* (8:42)

Chris Pedro Trakas, baritone;
David Del Tredici, piano

Brother (20:09)

9. *IIIII* (2:08)
10. *These Lousy Corridors (Closets Again)* ... (4:23)
11. *This Solid Ground/The Best By Far* (5:47)
12. *Brother* (7:51)

John Kelly, vocalist;
David Del Tredici, piano

Total playing time: 74:40

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Notes

This CD presents the first recorded fruits of a new era in the musical output of composer **David Del Tredici** (b Cloverdale, CA, 16 March 1937). The art-song form is relatively new to the composer, but even more significant is the selection of poetry. By a variety of authors, mostly contemporary and American, it explicitly addresses modern life and sexuality, particularly the experience of gay men. The frankness of language and the diversity of sources are major departures for Del Tredici, who previously focused exclusively (and for years at a time) on two authors, first James Joyce and later, and most famously, Lewis Carroll. Yet most important of all is the music itself, and Del Tredici responds to this new “palette” of texts with fresh energy and newborn spirit. Though emotional content was never absent from Del Tredici’s earlier works, in these intimate songs the composer offers himself more openly and candidly than ever before.

There may be no American composer whose stylistic development so closely matches the chapters of his personal growth as David Del Tredici. He came into maturity composing in the dominant style of the 1960s, serialism, and gained particular attention for four chamber music settings of texts by James Joyce. This was followed by a path-breaking return to tonality brought about by a near obsession with the *Alice in Wonderland* books of Lewis Carroll. Among the many Alice works, mostly for large orchestra and voice, was *In Memory of a Summer Day*, which received the Pulitzer Prize for Music in 1980—proving that its predecessor, the celebrated *Final Alice* (1975), was hardly final. (Hardly, indeed: the opera *Dum Dee Tweedle* [1992] still awaits its premiere production.)

All this is rather well known. What is less known is Del Tredici’s unique connection between the personal and the artistic, a linkage that dates to his earliest musical experiences. In 1996, the composer wrote: “Throughout my adolescence, playing the piano and later composing were the only two activities which allowed me to express feelings. No wonder I practiced so many hours a day, composed with such passion! As well, music—my special gift—allowed me to ignore my nascent sexuality, even to pretend that it didn’t exist.”

It was Del Tredici’s recognition of his own life story in the lives of Joyce and Carroll which led him to such a concentrated focus on their writings: “Certainly my attraction to the poetry of James Joyce and the *Wonderland* books of Lewis Carroll relates, in part, to sexuality and shame. Identifying earliest with Joyce the tortured, lapsed Catholic, I moved on, even more ardently, to Carroll, the clever man with the sexual secret. I think it was our secrets—Lewis Carroll’s liking little girls and me liking big boys—that drew us together. I always used to say, ‘if you gave me Lewis Carroll’s shopping list I could set it to music.’ You see, it was not the words, it was the man I really set.” (from *Gay American Composers*, CRI CD 721).

Still mirroring in his art his own personal development, Del Tredici in middle age has broken through into a new post-Carroll emotional landscape.

By the mid-1980s, Del Tredici was publicly out as a gay man, but his inner struggles continued and led him to explore an assortment of approaches to healing and self-knowledge. Some of these might be viewed as typical of the 1990s:

twelve-step recovery, alternative spirituality, and a certain public openness and self-revelation. In a 1994 article in *The Advocate*, Del Tredici spoke frankly about his struggle with alcoholism and sexual addiction. His success in dealing with these conditions has come, at least in part, from addressing them. No more secrets.

Another significant personal breakthrough for Del Tredici came through his experiences with The Body Electric School, a San Francisco-based organization that sponsors workshops across the country, attended primarily by gay men, on the integration of eroticism, spirituality, and healing. In the summer of 1996, Del Tredici interrupted his summer residency at Yaddo, the renowned artist colony in upstate New York, to attend “Dear Love of Comrades,” a weeklong Body Electric retreat on the West Coast. This prolonged immersion in a sexually awakened community setting proved to be cathartic.

“I fell in love, I got angry, I got jealous . . . I was out of control emotionally. It was a sexual reawakening—a very intense time. I returned to Yaddo with two poems from fellow participants of the workshop, as sort of souvenirs of the experience. It was lonely and—though I had a New York Philharmonic commission to fulfill (*The Spider and the Fly*)—I began to set one of the Body Electric poems to music. It went at lightning speed and was the first non-Alice text that I set in twenty years!”

Since the summer of 1996, then, Del Tredici has enjoyed greater speed and fluidity in his songwriting—producing more than fifty songs, most of them for voice and piano—and has often drawn upon poetry that is overtly sexual. This represents a sizable addition to Del Tredici’s catalogue, produced in a dramatically short amount of time. “I realized that I was composing faster than ever. Most of the songs were written in one or two days, with few revisions. It was almost like taking dictation directly from the Muse! This must have been the way that Mozart and Schubert wrote. How else could they have produced so much music in such short lives?”

The compactness of the song form itself appealed to the composer. “I like the shortness. It’s over and done with in an intense moment. I often feel as though I have no relation to it thereafter. Compositionally, I was used to dragging something around for a year or more. It’s been very freeing.”

Beyond the works recorded here, an overview of some of Del Tredici’s recent song catalogue confirms his new focus, including among other things his desire to “celebrate sex.” *Gay Life* (2000) is a forty-five minute cycle of six orchestral songs with texts by gay American poets including Allen Ginsberg, Paul Monette, and Thom Gunn. Commissioned by Michael Tilson Thomas and the San Francisco Symphony, it was premiered in May 2001. *Chana’s Story* (1996), for mezzo-soprano and piano, sets Chana Bloch’s depiction of a woman’s love affair, from ecstatic inception to lonely dissolution. It is reminiscent of Schumann’s *Frauenliebe und Leben*. *Dracula* (1999) is a gothically-charged setting for soprano and thirteen instruments of a poem by Alfred Corn. *Powertool* (1998), six songs for male and female voices, is Del Tredici’s most explicitly sexual cycle. It’s a shocker, at times exploring dominance and submission, and has yet to be performed. *Lament for the Death of a Bullfighter* (1998), for male voice and piano, sets Joshua Beckman’s nine-part poem about friendship and farewell. (“I cried when I first heard Joshua read this poem,” Del Tredici recalls.)

With such audacious titles and topics, Del Tredici is surely breaking down barriers in the staid world of classical music, where the genteel and evasive is often valued more than the honest or explicit—and where acknowledgement of the

homosexuality of such masters as Barber and Copland was until recently thought to be in bad taste. But decorum and convention are no longer a part of Del Tredici’s agenda. “I like to set poems that are provocatively gay,” the composer declares. “I’m tired of sunsets, spring, autumn, sadness . . . I’m sick of it all!”

Beyond the texts, what remains central is Del Tredici’s music, which emerges from a deeply-felt intuitive place. In the *Alice* works, he spun an elaborate tonal web, attached at critical points to Carroll’s simple texts but, more importantly, poised to capture the hidden emotions seething beneath. But life, again, translates into art: As Del Tredici openly embraces his own emotions, his newest compositions deal boldly with provocative texts and marry words and music with greater parity. Del Tredici aims to touch, with a new and startling directness, the listener’s heart—not surprising, really, given all the inner work he has done to touch his own.

—Joseph Dalton,
New York 2001

Miz Inez Sez is a cycle of five songs, for high soprano and piano, to the poetry of Colette Inez. Four of the songs were written in 1996 and one (“The Beckoning”) in 1998. The work was commissioned by the ensemble Sequitur and is (as the title-page says) “dedicated with admiration and friendship to Hila Plitmann.”

Colette Inez is a much-honored American poet, has written eight books and is on the faculty of Columbia University. Inez and Del Tredici are kindred spirits. Each shares an uproarious, fanciful sense of fun, as well as a tormented Catholic past. “As had James Joyce, so now does Colette Inez touch my damaged Catholic nerve, which is a spot full of hurt and, paradoxically, humor—that effective, if temporary, antidote to pain,” says Del Tredici.

Inez refers to herself as a “collapsed” Catholic. Her father became a monsignor, the year she was born! Raised by severe Belgian nuns, she was, at eight, adopted by a Long Island family “looking to soothe its alcoholic discord,” she writes.

In his program note to the April 28, 2000 premiere, Del Tredici wrote, “the verse of Colette Inez is madcapedly poignant, brilliantly nutty, freshly, richly, deeply felt.” He went on then to describe each of the cycle’s songs, which are musically interconnected and played without pause:

“Alive and Taking Names”

This title poem from her second collection (1977) is a “list” poem—a playful compendium of hypochondriacal complaints. The first verse lists ointments; the second verse, ailments; the third, medicine men. The concluding couplet is a surprise (and, I think, the real-life voice of Inez) as it affirms a simple, undoctored wellness.

The music is a steady chain of complaining, anguished minor seconds resolving into minor thirds. Only at the end, with the words “I am well . . .,” does the music suddenly turn to the happier major mode. Curiously, the piano accompaniment is for the left hand alone.

“The Happy Child”

From her fourth book, *Family Life* (1988), this is another poem with a “twist” at the end. As well, it is what I would call an “inner child” poem. Four of the five verses paint the happy child’s idyllic, fairy-tale existence. Everything looks perfect. The last verse reveals the lie, as the buried voice of the unhappy inner child emerges—angry, resentful, ignored, hurting.

The music follows the poem’s dramatic shift of tone. Quiet parallel major-ninth chords through various keys fill the first four verses. With the fifth painful verse, the music turns to the

minor mode and rises to a passionate climax. Over a flowing piano arabesque, the last four lines of the poem are repeated in the manner of a lament. As this dies away, the “Happy Child” music starkly reappears and entwines itself—happy and sad ‘til the end.

“Good News! Nilda Is Back” (from *The Woman Who Loved Worms*, 1972)

Walking one April in the Washington Heights section of New York City, Colette Inez saw a beautician’s window proclaim: “Good News! Nilda Is Back.” The poem, she says, immediately began to form itself in her consciousness: the imaginary life of Nilda, hairdresser in upper Manhattan.

At eight and a half minutes, this is not only the longest song of the cycle but also the most “Spanish.” Really, this is more dramatic scene than art song. Examples of drama abound: at the words “now she cha chas up the aisles,” familiar tango strains partner the music already in progress. At another turn, punctuated by unexpected percussion, “Tico Tico” is quoted. The maternal side of Nilda is suggested in an especially tender treatment of the line “like a grandmother combing the hair of a child.” Nilda’s imagined love life is not neglected: Passionate music underpins the line, “her hair . . . at night damp . . . from waves of love.” The original sign-in-the-window/poem-title is heard one last time, as a tiny postlude—sung quietly, as if from afar.

“The Beckoning” (published in *New Orleans Review*, 1999)

This is a garden poem, rich in flower names, nonsensical humor and the sheer joy of playing with language. Musically, the song is in a clear ABA form with the first three and last three lines of the poem framing a faster, brusquely playful middle section. As an ending, the poem’s opening three lines appear again, reset to suggest mysterious tendrils beckoning ecstasy . . .

“Chateauf du Pape, The Pope’s Valet Speaks” (from *Alive and Taking Names*, 1977)

This poem is a monologue—all in the increasingly drunken voice of a valet attending the pope. The poet tweaks the Catholic Church—its formality, its hypocrisy, its antiquated ways. Being drunk, the valet gets careless: Latin phrases appear nonsensically (“omnia vincit Armour baloney”), a shocking affair is revealed (“I once had a prioress . . .”), a resentment against all things Belgian (“that Flemish hulk of gutturals”).

Like the third song, this is really a dramatic scene. The music—filled with pompous chord progressions, grandly drunken scale flourishes, skewered counterpoint—is unbuttoned and boisterous. Towards the end, I incorporate into the musical fabric the well-known Latin hymn “Tantum Ergo,” to insure that the religious parody be inescapable. The piece ends with a nearly realistic “pounding at our door.”

The 3 *Baritone Songs*, written in March and April of 1999, are taken from a nine-song cycle entitled *Inspirational Song*. This varied collection of poetry, mostly by poet-friends of Del Tredici, finds the composer grappling with issues of spirituality and transcendence, as well as with sexuality and gay consciousness. In the struggle, he overcomes more traditional art song boundaries and produces, rather, highly dramatic scenes or arias.

Again Del Tredici writes:

“‘Quietness,’ by the ancient queer Sufi mystic Rumi, is a tiny poem exhorting the reader to follow a meditative path through surrender to ecstasy. Each line, haiku-like, reveals an insight. Some are paradoxical, others profound.

“New York poet Michael Klein’s ‘Drinking Song’ is a ‘handful’! In my obstreperous setting, the piano personifies a drunk in action—rough, relentless, seductive, ‘dangerous.’ Never sure of his safety, or whether he’s ‘riding’ a ‘dolphin’ or a ‘shark,’ the poet (like the singer) hangs on for dear life.

“‘Matthew Shepard’ by Jaime Manrique touched me. The brutal homophobic death of this innocent young man resonated with my own loss through AIDS of a young lover, Paul. To surround with music that moment when the soul leaves the body, that transformation of pain into bliss, was my challenge and my inspiration.”

In 1996, when Del Tredici returned to New York City from Yaddo following his first burst of Body Electric-inspired song writing, he heard/saw the extraordinary performance artist John Kelly for the first time. Kelly was performing *Paved Paradise*, the famous show in which he both physically and musically “channeled” Joni Mitchell by singing eighteen of her songs.

“I was moved by his charisma and his haunting voice,” says Del Tredici. “It was so unlike the classically-trained singers I knew. My own newly-composed songs, I felt, needed a new kind of interpreter, and John seemed to be it. So I went backstage after the performance and said, ‘John Kelly, I adore you and want you to sing my songs.’ And that was the beginning.”

The *Brother* cycle was born in 1997, when Del Tredici and Kelly chanced to have MacDowell Colony residencies at the same time. “One morning,” Del Tredici says, “I woke up remembering music I had dreamt—a rare occurrence. After I played it through on the piano, I realized that this was a song needing words. But what text? I recalled that John Kelly had, not long before, given me his poetry to read. I found the manuscript, then a particular poem I liked. Quickly, I realized that the dreamt music and the new poem were a perfect fit. The cycle had begun.”

Kelly’s poetry bespeaks his comfortable gay sensibility. Being gay is not the issue, but the background. The foreground, like that of so much poetry, is passion, longing, love, and lust. Four of the eight songs of *Brother* are included on this CD.

“‘I I I I’ traces the trajectory of a doomed relationship,” says poet John Kelly. It is a litany of two-word phrases, each beginning with a passionate “I.” This is the music Del Tredici first dreamed—a ceaseless, throbbing rush of notes until the final exhausted phrase (“I’ll live”) added by Del Tredici himself.

“‘These Lousy Corridors (Closets Again),’ says the poet, “portrays the quest for physical intimacy in a hidden public arena.” It is a bitter song with a Spanish flavor and biting, grinding, dissonant notes. With the words “lust” and “freedom,” the song rises to a grandly ironic climax.

“This Solid Ground/The Best By Far” combines two poems into one song. There is a decidedly Schumannesque quality to the music—an innocence rich with first love, first arousal, hope.

With “Brother,” hope begins to fade. Kelly says, “Brother, written on a flight from San Francisco to New York City, describes a promising amorous connection cut short by distance.” Of all the songs in the cycle, Del Tredici calls this one his favorite. The wistful mood, the strophic form with its folk-song overtones, is truly haunting.

Del Tredici makes much of a climactic, penultimate line: “And we commit our incest/My brother.” He even adds a final line of his own, “My brother/Lover.” By repeating over and over the juxtaposed words “brother” and “lover,” Del Tredici

brings the idea of incest strongly to the fore—not something that Kelly intended. (“It’s a play on words,” says Kelly, “not about family but about camaraderie.”)

The ending is a surprise. As the “brother/lover” words repeat and fade, another voice is mysteriously heard, counting in Italian from one (uno) to thirteen (Tredici).

As a painter signs his canvas near the bottom, so Del Tredici places his musical autograph on the waning bars of the final song.

—John Van Tuyl,
Stanford, CT 2001

Soprano **Hila Plitmann** is a lauded interpreter of David Del Tredici’s music. In April 2000, she premiered song cycle *Miz Inez Sez*, written for her by Del Tredici and commissioned by new music ensemble Sequitur, at the Miller Theater in New York with the composer as pianist. She also sang Del Tredici’s *Night Conjure-Verse* for soprano, mezzo-soprano and eleven instruments on that program. In 1997, she premiered Del Tredici’s *The Spider and the Fly* with the New York Philharmonic, Kurt Masur conducting.

Plitmann has toured extensively with the renowned new music ensemble Continuum. She has performed as a featured soloist with the Israel Philharmonic Orchestra, the New World Symphony, the New Israeli Opera, the Cleveland Chamber Orchestra, the Mexico City Philharmonic, the Pasadena Symphony, and numerous other orchestras and ensembles in Israel and abroad. Ms. Plitmann received her bachelor’s and master’s degrees from the Juilliard School.

Baritone **Chris Pedro Trakas** is noted for an expansive and eclectic repertoire that ranges from Mozart, Schubert, and Mahler to Bolcom, Adams, and Ellington. He has performed in opera, in recital and in concert with orchestra at the Metropolitan Opera, the Lincoln Center “Great Performers” series, and the Kennedy Center in Washington, D. C. He has appeared with the Boston, St. Louis, and Chicago Symphony orchestras; with the Israel Philharmonic Orchestra, the New York City Opera, the Frankfurt Opera and Switzerland’s Theatre Basel; and at the Ravinia Festival, Italy’s Spoleto Festival, and Ireland’s Wexford Festival.

Recent world premieres include Wallace and Korie’s *Hopper’s Wife* with the Long Beach Opera, Robert Kapilow’s *The Polar Express* at Boston’s Jordan Hall with Musica Viva, and Marek Zebrowski’s *Leaving Alexandria* at Genoa’s Teatro Carlo Felice. Trakas premiered David Del Tredici’s *3 Baritone Songs* at New York’s Weill Recital Hall in 1999, with the composer as pianist.

Trakas received his bachelor’s degree in organ and music history from Eckerd College in St. Petersburg, Florida, and holds a master’s degree in voice from the University of Houston.

Performance artist/vocalist **John Kelly**’s diverse works have been performed with the San Francisco Symphony, BAM’s Next Wave Festival, Lincoln Center’s “Great Performers New Visions” series, and at various performance spaces and festivals both in the U.S. and abroad. Kelly has performed three solo vocal recitals at Weill Recital Hall. Kelly has been a frequent interpreter of David Del Tredici’s songs and in 2001 created a performance piece, *Brother*, in which he sings eight of them. He studied voice with Peter Elkus at the Academia Musicale Ottorino Respighi in Assisi, Italy.

Kelly creates both solo and ensemble performance works which incorporate film and video, choreography and song. His 1990 *Love Of A Poet* was a dramatic rendering of Robert Schumann’s *Dichterliebe* song cycle, performed in lower Manhattan’s Battery Maritime building. *Paved Paradise*, his homage to the work of Joni Mitchell, has been performed extensively; it was also the opening act for Natalie Merchant’s “Ophelia” tour.

Kelly has received two New York Dance and Performance (Bessie) Awards, two Obie Awards, an American Choreographer Award, and a 2001 Cal/Arts Alpert Award in dance. He has been the recipient of Guggenheim, NYFA, NEA, and Greenwall Foundation fellowships, and has completed residencies at the MacDowell Colony, Yaddo, and Yale Rep. His visual autobiography, *John Kelly*, will be published by the 2wice Arts Foundation and distributed by Aperture in the fall of 2001. To find out more, visit his web page www.johnkellyco.org.

Production Notes

Produced and engineered by Judith Sherman

Editing assistant: Jeanne Velonis

3 Baritone Songs and *Brother* were recorded June 21-23, 1999. Engineering assistant: Jeanne Velonis. *Miz Inez Sez* was recorded May 1-2, 2000. Engineering assistant: Jennifer Munson. All were recorded in Theater C of the Performing Arts Center, SUNY, Purchase, New York.