

HUGO WEISGALL

**THE STRONGER, opera in one act (1952)
with Johanna Meier, soprano**

FANCIES AND INVENTIONS

**for baritone and five instruments (1970)
with Julian Patrick**

The Aeolian Chamber Players conducted by The Composer

THE STRONGER was written in the late spring and summer of 1952 expressly for the Hilltop Opera Company of Baltimore, a small, professional cooperative group which I had helped organize and directed for a number of seasons.

From the first I regarded this piece as an experiment, a kind of operatic exercise. My primary task was to find ways to translate Strindberg's psychological monodrama, with its rapid, constantly changing moods and its almost total lack of sustained moments, into musical terms. The chief problem was that the music had to function alternately as background and foreground—at times pure atmosphere, then shifting between characterizing the protagonist, Estelle, and picturing the physical movements of the wordless Lisa.

Also I sought somehow to balance the two roles more equally. Rather than conform to the traditional theatrical interpretation in which "the star" plays the silent role and comes out on top, I tried to leave open the question as to which of the two women is really "the stronger".

Finally, because of our limited production resources (and not without Schoenberg's highly complex *Erwartung* in mind as a model not to be followed) I tried to achieve my objectives as simply and economically as possible. Hence the small physical set up—an orchestra of eight (although with considerable doubling in the woods), and the deliberate use of very limited and highly stylized musical material. Almost all of the music evolves from the first twenty measures, played before the first words are spoken.

The first four performances (with piano, on consecutive days) were hair-raising and almost convinced me that my "experiment" would not work. For the first one on a Thursday, the final fifty or sixty bars had not yet been written. I begged the indulgence of the tiny audience, told them about the piece, had the soprano sing snatches of it, sang bits of it myself, and more or less improvised the end.

I finished the vocal score by Friday noon and we rehearsed for several hours in preparation for that evening's performance. I had been convinced for some time that the original Estelle had been miscast. Although she looked and acted well she could manage neither the somewhat difficult vocal intervals nor the trickier rhythmic passages. The fact that the end of the opera had remained unfinished until Friday's rehearsal did not help matters. The tension was pretty high all around.

Friday's so-called performance was a total disaster. Estelle broke down practically at the first bar, though our wonderful "cocktail pianist" (the composer, Dominick Argento), chain smoking and doubling as prompter, managed to get her through to the curtain. Afterwards there were tears, hurt feelings and hysteria, and my

role as villain became clear when Estelle's husband threatened to beat me up. Saturday's performance had to be cancelled and another work substituted to make up our double bill. At this point I decided to make a clean sweep. I fired Estelle and asked Eva Bober, the understudy, if she would undertake the role for Sunday's matinee—our most important performance of the run. She agreed. After singing Saturday evening—I no longer recall what role—Eva sat with Dominick and me, fortified by endless supplies of coffee, Dominick still chain-smoking, Nathalie, my wife, giving moral support as well as sitting in for the silent role, and proceeded to work all night to get the music memorized and to make major staging adjustments. We quit about five in the morning, not so much because of the 4 o'clock performance as because of the dress rehearsal called for 1 p.m. The performance went off as scheduled and somehow seemed to work. *THE STRONGER* has remained my most frequently performed opera.

Though *THE STRONGER* was originally designed to be coupled with my first opera *THE TENOR*, I later decided to make it one of a trilogy of short works to fill an evening. One other of these has been composed to date, my verbatim setting of Yeats' *Purgatory* (1958).

Hugo Weisgall

FANCIES AND INVENTIONS, for baritone and five instruments, is a work of large scope, lasting almost 25 minutes. The composer has carefully chosen nine poems from the *Hesperides* of Robert Herrick to provide contrast and variety and perhaps a bit of unconscious autobiography. Several themes run through the cycle. Bitterness toward critics is juxtaposed with the soothing qualities of music; love is viewed through the eyes of an old man. The placement of the songs presents a kind of argument-resolution idea. The harshly declaimed *To Criticks* for piano and voice alone is immediately followed by *Soft Musick*, its resolution. The flower-song duets act as nostalgic interludes, and employ deliberately archaic-sounding devices, such as the choral prelude technique in *To Daffadils*.

In this work, Weisgall has made the voice a virtuoso instrument employing a wide range, long sustained lines, intricate melismatic passagework, and operatic declamation. Similarly, each instrument is treated as a soloist as well as a member of the close-knit ensemble. The instrumental style is varied from song to song. Sometimes one hears delicate chamber music and sometimes orchestral textures. Every instrument has a chance to "show off".

The last song of the cycle is a kind of microcosm of the main ideas. The argument is resolved by the "soule-melting Lullabies" after a big orchestral climax, and the cycle is rounded out with the "chiming spheres" music that had first appeared in *To the Detracter*.

The composer writes:

“This work achieved its over-all formal structure some time after I had finally decided to set a series of poems with differing subject matter, but all by a single poet. I realized that what I wanted to do in this instance was to write a group of pieces which, together, would make up a whole, but in which the individual challenges were primarily musical and not dramatic ones. Hence the title. Both words have definite musical connotations as well as nonmusical meanings. *Fancy* refers to a form found frequently in

17th century English instrumental music, and *Invention*, of course, harks back to Bach. Though neither of these terms is traditionally associated with vocal music, I chose to use them this way because the separate songs making up the cycle do resemble fantasias or Bach-like inventions.

“The work is dedicated to Randolph S. Rothschild as a token of gratitude for his many years of continued artistic support and friendship.”

It was commissioned by the Baltimore Chamber Music Society.

HUGO WEISGALL has devoted most of his professional life to the study and creation of opera and vocal music. He was born in Czechoslovakia in 1912 of German-speaking Jewish parents. Singing was a part of his daily life; his father was a singer, in fact is still a practicing cantor in Baltimore, where the family settled in 1920. Even as a child he was familiar with the Schubert-to-Mahler song tradition as well as the major operatic literature, and he played the piano as his father sang. He has produced a large body of vocal works including six operas, numerous songs and choral works, and three song cycles: *Soldier Songs* (1946), *A Garden Eastward* (1952) and *Fancies and Inventions* (1970).

His opera, THE TENOR, may be heard on CRI 197.

JOHANNA MEIER was destined for a stage career from the age of five weeks, when she made her debut in the Black Hills Passion Play, which her parents produced and directed. She has since starred in opera throughout the U.S.A., and has sung leading roles at the New York City Opera. JULIAN PATRICK has also made numerous appearances in American opera. In addition to his nation-wide appearances, Mr. Patrick created the roles of George in Carlisle Floyd's *Of Mice and Men*, and of Don in Hugo Weisgall's *Nine Rivers From Jordan* as well as the work he sings on this record.

THE AEOLIAN CHAMBER PLAYERS are among the finest interpreters of contemporary music. Members on this recording are Lewis Kaplan, John Graham, Jonathan Abramowitz, David Walter, Lloyd A. Green, Albert Gerald Regni, Ronald K. Anderson, Walter Ponce.

(Original liner notes from CRI LP jacket)

THE STRONGER

by Hugo Weisgall

based on the play by August Strindberg

libretto by Richard Hart

The scene is a quiet, uptown bar late on the afternoon of Christmas Eve.

ESTELLE (*entering*)

Lisa, darling, how nice to see you. But sitting all by yourself Like a bachelor at his club!
I do hate seeing anyone alone on Christmas Eve in a restaurant.

(She seats herself and piles the table high with her shopping.)

May I sit down? Even if you *like* to be alone I don't think it wholesome.

I can't bear people Who aren't serious about Christmas.

It reminds me of a wedding party I once saw in a Paris restaurant,

The bride was reading "La Mode". And the groom was playing billiards with the witnesses.

The French are so cold blooded, really.

(She pauses as though expecting a reply and, as none is forthcoming, continues uncomfortably.)

I know you're bored with Christmas. I suppose it's only the children who keep me at it
year after year. I work like a slave for weeks; Every morning I'm in town shopping,

And then, ungrateful little wretches,

They'll drag us out of bed at dawn tomorrow morning. But don't you want to see
some of those marvelous things?

(She rummages among the boxes and pulls out the following gifts.)

Isn't this a sweet infant? She'll do anything but throw fits and cut teeth! We never
had anything like that.

And here's a pair of slippers for Harold, Maroon, I hate maroon; But he must have
everything that one color, slippers, ties, dressing gown.

(She puts a hand in each slipper and walks them across the table.)

See what small feet he has, seven and a half... But not effeminate!

The way he walks up and down, up and down, up and down, Like the tiger, in the zoo.

(insinuatingly)

Of course you've never seen him that way.

In dressing gown and slippers. When he loses his temper

He really stomps!

(Imitating her husband's baritone.)

"Damn it all! Who stole the bulb from my study lamp again?"

Or when the thermostat breaks down. And cold drafts run along the floor.

(Imitating again)

"My god, my feet are freezing while a fortune in oil goes up in smoke!" But I am mean,
Baring his little weaknesses in public! He's almost perfect, really.

What are you laughing at?

I know he's only human. But I can depend on Harold. Not that he isn't subject to temptation. I know because he tells me and we laugh about it.
That little beast Audrey . . . She made a play for him the last time I was on the road.
I'd have clawed out her eyes.

I'm glad I heard about it first from him. And not from my dear, dear friends. And she's not the only one. Why should they all make passes at my poor husband?
Maybe they think because he's a producer
He'll give them jobs and build them into stars. Why does every snip of a debutante fancy herself as another Ponselle? Maybe you tried it once. But then he never cared for you.
And you never appreciated him.

(She pauses, embarrassed.)

But there I go, being catty again. Let's look at some more of these nice things.

(She opens a box, shows a set of toy soldiers.)

Aren't these the cutest little soldiers?

Ha-ha-ha-ha!! And this hunting knife for Freddie,

(She draws a wicked-looking blade from its sheath and makes a fierce little stabbing gesture across the table.)

Just like the real thing. Oh, did I frighten you? Dear Lisa, You know I couldn't hurt a mosquito. But *you* could.

You could slip a knife between my ribs and not turn one beautiful golden hair.

I don't know why you should dislike me. Yes, I do.

You're still brooding about that mix-up over old Max and me.

And how I "stole" your part. I know it isn't true; But you, you sphinx, I know you still suspect me, And it's so unfair.

(She raises a hand as if to ward off an interruption.)

What does it matter, anyhow? I'm out of all that,

Now and forever. Lisa, come and spend the evening with us.

If only to show you're not angry. I hate to think of us as enemies. Just because I spoiled your little scheme that once.

(A pause, Estelle leans forward and looks searchingly into the other's face.)

It was so strange the way we met. At first I was afraid of you. So much afraid I didn't dare to let you out of sight again —

No matter how I planned my day I always ended, I always ended somewhere near you. I didn't have the courage to hate you. So I became your friend.

But when you call'd on Harold and me something was wrong. I saw he didn't like you. And it annoyed me like a tight shoe.

I asked him to be nice to you

But it was no good. Until you were engaged.

Then, then you became fast friends.

(Again she raises her hand.)

No, don't interrupt!

It was all so strange, so very strange. As though the two of you had been afraid to show how you really felt until it was safe. And yet I wasn't jealous, no, not yet. And at Freddie's

christening.

When you were Godmother, I made Harold kiss you, as he did,

You were embarrassed, both of you.

You turned quite red, and he, he was **pale**. I scarcely noticed at the time, I haven't thought about it since.

I never really thought of it till now!

(She rises impulsively.)

Why don't you speak? You haven't said a single word. You just let me talk!

You sit and stare like, like a spider catching flies.

(With a note of hysteria.)

Your eyes have drawn out thoughts; Thoughts that I was never conscious of.

Why did you break your engagement? Why won't you visit us tonight?

You needn't say a single word.

All at once it's clear to me. It all fits together. The whole under-handed business. Why must all his things be this horrid color, like dried blood?

(She brushes the slippers off the table.)

Because it's your favorite —

You're wearing it tonight. Why must we go to the mountains every year? Because you can't stand the smell of the sea. That's why my boy's name is Frederick because it was your father's name.

That's why I read your favorite books, and eat your ghastly food,

And drink your drinks, damned Martinis horrid, bitter things

(Knocks her glass off the table.)

You made me swallow ev'rything. Even your warped desires

(She seizes the other woman's untouched Martini and gulps it down.)

(Tears of self-pity show in her eyes. She sits down.)

I couldn't run away. You were always beside me, I was never free of you. Even when I slept, I've dreamed I was in the water, my feet bound, striking out with my arms, but sinking down, down, down, down to the darkest depths. And there you lay in wait, a monster crab, reaching out with your claws. And I'm there now. Here I am, half dead with jealousy. While you just sit, silent and indifferent. You don't care if it's snowing or if the moon is out whether it's Christmas or the middle of July.

Happy or unhappy, it's all one to you.

You are incapable of hate. And you don't know how to love.

Here you sit and wait. Here you sit and wait in your cozy little corner reading the papers to see who's in trouble. Whose marriage is breaking up, whose show is closing. Here you draw in your silly little victims

And let them talk themselves out; Here you take your secret, little tributes

Poor Lisa, really, You know, I pity you,

You *must* be unhappy in your lifeless way. I should be angry with you. But I'm not. Who could be angry with a dead woman? And as for Harold. Why should I worry if you or someone else taught me to drink Martinis?

(She drains the last few drops of the drink.)

taught me to drink Martinis?

They're always chic and never fattening.
And if I learned to dress from you. So much the better . . .
It helps me hold my husband.
My gain is your loss. Yes, I think you have lost him entirely.
Of course you meant for me to break with him; But, you see, I have a thick skin, I
never would do that. Suppose he did love you once? I'm not that narrow-minded —
and besides it was exciting to have a man that someone wanted more than I did.
You never took anything from me, you only gave.

(Gaily)

And now who's holding the cards? For a while it seems that you did.
For a while you held his love. But it belonged to me. Frederick was a name you gave.
But the flesh is mine.

(Almost speaking.)

Why are you always so silent?
I used to think it was because you were the stronger; But the simple truth is that
you had no words worth saying — Your mind and heart are empty.

(She bends to pick up the slippers, speaking calmly, almost pleasantly.)

I'm going home now and take his slippers with me.
You couldn't learn from others. Could you? You couldn't twist and bend. So, like a
dry reed, you broke. Thanks, Lisa.
Thanks for all your help.
I think you taught me how to love my husband.

(She gathers her packages and begins to leave, then turns.)

Oh, and yes, yes, Merry Christmas.

(She leaves.)

FANCIES AND INVENTIONS, FOR BARITONE AND FIVE INSTRUMENTS (1970)

Texts of Poems

f r o m

The Hesperides of Robert Herrick (1648)

1. TO CRITICKS (piano)

lie write, because lie give
You Criticks means to live:
For sho'd I not supply
The Cause, th' effect wo'd die.

2. SOFT MUSICK

(flute, clarinet, viola and cello)

The mellow touch of musick most doth wound
The soule, when it doth rather sigh, then sound.

3. TO DAFFADILLS

(clarinet and cello)

Faire Daffadills, we weep to see
You haste away so soone:
As yet the early-rising Sun
Has not attain'd his Noone.
Stay, stay,
Until! the hasting day
Has run
But to the Even-song;
And, having pray'd together, we
Will go with you along.
We have short time to stay, as you,
We have as short a Spring;
As quick a growth to meet Decay,
As you, or any thing.
We die.
As your hours doe, and drie
Away,
Like to the Summers, raine;
Or as the pearles of Mornings dew
Ne'r to be found againe

4. TO HIS MISTRESSE OBJECTING
TO HIM NEITHER TOYING OR TALKING

(flute, clarinet, viola, cello and piano)

You say I love not, 'cause I doe not play
Still with your curies, and kisse the time away.
You blame me too, because I cann't devise
Some sport, to please those Babies in your eyes:
By *Loves Religion*, I must here confesse it,
The most I love, when I the least expresse it.
Small griefs find tongues: Full Casques are ever found
To give (if any, yet) but little sound.
Deep waters, noyse-lesse are; And this we know,
That chiding streams betray small depth below.
So when Love speechlesse is, she doth expresse
A depth in love, and that depth, bottomlesse.
Now since my love is tongue-lesse, know me such,
Who speak but little, 'cause I love so much.

5. TO CHERRY-BLOSSOMES

(flute and clarinet)

Ye may simper, blush and smile,
And perfume the aire a-while:
But (sweet things) ye must be gone;
Fruit, ye know, is coming on:
Then, Ah! Then, where is your grace,
When as Cherries come in place?

6. TO THE DETRACTER

(piano)

I ask't thee oft, what Poets thou hast read,
And ilk'st the best? Still thou reply'st, The dead.
I shall, ere long, with green turfs cover'd be;
Then sure thou't like, or thou wilt envie me.

7. THE FROZEN HEART

(flute, clarinet, viola, cello and piano)

I freeze, I freeze, and nothing dwels
In me but Snow, and *ysicles*.
For pitties sake, give your advice,
To melt this snow, and thaw this ice;
I'll drink down Flames, but if so be
Nothing but love can supple me;
I'll rather keepe this frost, and snow,
Then to be thaw'd, or heated so.

8. I CALL AND I CALL

(flute and viola)

I call, I call: who doe ye call?
The Maids to catch this Cowslip-ball:
But since the Cowslips fading be,
Troth, leave the flowers, and Maids, take me.
Yet, if that neither you will doe,
Speak but the word, and Ile take you.

9. TO MUSICK. A SONG

(flute, clarinet, viola, cello and piano)

Musick, thou *Queen of Heaven*, Care-charming spel,
That strik'st a stilnesse into hell:
Thou that tam'st *Tygers*, and fierce storms (that rise)
With thy Soule-melting Lullabies:
Fall down, down, down, from those thy chiming spheres,
To charme our soules, as thou enchant'st our eares.