

When bass-baritone David Pittsinger commissioned composer Scott Eyerly to create a piece that he and his boy soprano son, Richard, could sing together, he and Eyerly considered several subjects, including the Biblical, before the composer suggested how abundant in possibilities was the singer's late father's tenure as an honor guard at Arlington Cemetery, the hallowed ground in Virginia wherein active duty service members and veterans have been laid to rest since 1864. The synergy of music and word transmutes the personal and intimate—Pittsinger's love and admiration for his father—into *Arlington Sons*, a work extolling values that are America's publicly expressed analogues to the love that binds fathers to their boys. In patriotic service to liberty's preservation, the boy's grandfather, Corporal Pittsinger, modeled a willingness to sacrifice all for the greater good that reflects the self-sacrificial aspects of parenting.

Likewise has the “changing of the guard” its domestic and familial as well as military and ceremonial manifestations. Eyerly's text depicts a father introducing his pre-adolescent son to the ceremony of the Changing of the Guard at Arlington's Tomb of the Unknown Soldier: A rite, the father explains, that his father performed. As they comment on what they observe, the father endeavors to awaken his boy to the meaning of what he is witnessing. Although not a mystery to the lad in the way that the

Unknown Soldier is to history, his grandfather can be known to him only through what is transmitted to him by those who did know the man. In this, the son's relation to history is everyone's at that age: We can know it only so well, and integrate it into our inner lives only so thoroughly, as it is taught us.

The ideal father who protects the physical well-being of his children also invests in them a regard for the culture and its tradition in which their social, political and private lives will unfold. His protection and his investments bespeak respect and love. *Arlington Sons* is a love story on many levels. What is romantic in it is not the nature of the love between persons but the cherishment of ideals whose reward is "a good life," a state of being untranslatable into a financial equivalent and, therefore, noble. The ideal father is a nobleman in the sense of offering his protection, wisdom, experience, education and love in stewardship of his son's possibilities as he matures into manhood. Out of the need to establish his own identity, even an impeccably raised boy may temporarily distance himself from his father and his values, but the prodigal often returns, because love is irresistible. The Biblical story of the Prodigal Son points, of course, to the Father who always is ready to receive, with open arms, the traveler, son or daughter, who has wearied of the hell realms and longs for nothing so much as his real home.

During the September 11, 2012 performance of *Arlington Sons* at New York's magnificent Trinity Church, whose equilibrium between Protestant simplicity and Catholic grandeur speaks deeply of Christianity's history, this writer's attention was pinned for a time to a carved figure of Jesus in the wall behind the altar. Here was and is the paradigm for the father son relation. "Believe me that I am in the Father, and the Father in me..." JN 14:11. On the human level, where nothing lasts forever, this inseparability manifests as those phenomena of heritage and inheritance that qualify as blessings and are the requitals of love. The soldier's willingness to die for his country, like Jesus' for the good of humanity, is a further correspondence to the Christly template.

Eyerly's work as composer and librettist are of an only seeming simplicity. The words father and son sing to each other or to themselves are not the heightened language of poetry but words an intelligent American father and son could reasonably be expected to exchange. Indeed, the authenticity of the text is unchallengeable, since Eyerly based it on conversation David Pittsinger had with his son that stirred him so deeply he wrote it down shortly after their visit to the Unknown Soldier's memorial. When the father makes explicit that the Changing of the Guard at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier metaphorizes his eventual turning over to his son his own responsibilities as a defender with

these words,

One guard stands watch a little while,/ Another takes his  
place,/ And another his,/ And another his./ Can we pay them  
half what we owe?/ The guards we don't see,/ Or the guards  
we know?

the absence of verbal capework tracks a direct line to one's emotions. Plainspokenness is profoundly American. Our nation's puritanical Protestant roots testify to greatness having no need of ornateness; simplicity is a frank rebuke to monarchy's assumptions and to lies.

It should go without saying that the words would not be so impactful did Eyerly's music not make them flower. Originally composed for two voices and piano, Eyerly orchestrated *Arlington Sons* for its symphony premiere by the Pittsburgh Symphony in fall 2012. Of this version, the composer told me, "When the Changing of the Guard ceremony begins, the orchestra falls silent, except for plucked basses and harp. They play a theme which will repeat over and over, passed among different instruments, while other melodies come and go with it, in the form of a *passacaglia* [defined by *The Oxford Companion to Music* as "A through-composed variation form constructed over formal harmonic progressions"]. The *passacaglia* theme connects to the Tomb in three ways. First, it loosely follows the outline of 'Taps.' Second, each statement of the theme leads to another one starting a major third higher, such that

after every three statements, the original key is reached again—symbolizing the unbroken cycle of guards standing watch. Third, since the theme consists of seven notes, and three statements effect a return to the original key, a total of twenty-one notes comprises each ‘cycle,’ this being the number of steps a guard takes on each pass; the number of seconds he or she pauses between passes; and the number of the highest gun salute.”

The composer’s words testify to the thought, deliberation and craft inherent to the music of *Arlington Sons*. Eyerly creates music for the boy that renders the gentle erosion of his naïveté by his father’s guidance credible and touching. The music that denotes the boy’s dawning, immature sense of the riches he is heir to as an American and son of his biological father and son, philosophically, of the Fathers of the Nation, finds descriptive imagery in the father’s first words: “Come with me, son,/Walk with me up the hill,/Past the cherries, bursting white...” We hear, in the boy’s music over the course of this twelve minute long piece, a few petals fall from his “state of nature,” glimpsing thereby how that which has unbudded will fruit. The father’s music encompasses solemnity, reverence, awe, pride, humor and love. There is neither fear nor anger in it: It is, in their absence, Christly in its vibration.

It is possible that *Arlington Sons* is the first classical vocal work commissioned for real life father and son professional singers.

Certainly, the love one hears in David Pittsinger's voice on this recording of this performance, recorded at Yale University's Sprague Hall, is not simulated! Both Pittsingers acquit themselves splendidly, singing with beautiful tone, perfect enunciation and deep feeling. In this non-symphonic version of *Arlington Sons*, performed with pianist Bradley Moore and cellist Fred Lassen, they reveal Eyerly's *Arlington Sons* to be a unique and genuine contribution to the American classical music repertoire. It also commends the tradition of performers commissioning works tailored to their talents and to their interests. David Pittsinger's decision to see how such deeply felt aspects of his being and biography as fatherhood and patriotism might be translated by another artist into a work that could then be shared with the public has proved to be a rewarding one.

—James Kuslan