

Shimmerwords and idle songs (Selected Poems of the Tang Dynasty)

The collection of poems that make up this song cycle for soprano and piano are almost exclusively taken from the work of the Chinese poet Po Chu-i (772 - 846 C.E.). He was the most prolific of the Tang period poets, deeply concerned with the social problems of his time. His poetry is marked by humour and clarity, much of his poetry appearing somewhat easy-going. However, he had a caustic view of the government's effects on the lives of ordinary people and used satire and humour to draw attention to the rapacity of minor officials, social problems, and questionable religious practices. I have also chosen one poem from the work of 9th century poet Zhu Qingyu who in 826 was appointed to work on the Imperial Diary in the Palace Library. Praised for clear diction and fine descriptions, Zhu's art sits happily alongside that of Po Chu-i.

The poems of the cycle cover various subjects; travel, the joys of nature, the shortcomings of society (be they gossip, verbosity or ignorance) and musings on the transience of life. The musical settings are, I hope, immediate and colourful. The third section differs from the other parts of the cycle in that it is itself made up of three short poems. A clattering fanfare is used to connect, herald and reflect the mood of each short section. The other three songs are self-contained. Finally, a word of explanation regarding the title of this cycle. Shimmerwords is the name given to a cluster of stars in Ursa Major, but can also be seen as a kind of celestial incarnation of the literary arts. The notion of 'idleness' is a central concept in Taoism, where idleness is more a meditative state being at one with everyday life. The title's meaning therefore is a meditation on art as a reflection of ourselves and the world we live in.

Shimmerwords and idle songs was commissioned Leeds Lieder+ 2007 with funds partly provided by the RVW Trust

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