



love fail (2012) by David Lang

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49:39

Performed by Quince Ensemble

Amanda DeBoer Bartlett, soprano, glockenspiel

Kayleigh Butcher, mezzo soprano, conch shell, concert bass drum

Liz Pearse, soprano, ratchet, woodblock

Carrie Henneman Shaw, soprano, sizzle cymbal

Recorded at Wild Sound Studio, Minneapolis, MN, June/July 2019

Sound Engineering, Editing, Mixing, Mastering: Steve Kaul

Album Producer: Fredrick Gifford

Innova Director: Philip Blackburn

Operations Director: Chris Campbell

Publicist: Tim Igel

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Photo by Matt DeBoer

About Quince Ensemble

Singing with the precision and flexibility of modern chamber musicians, Quince Ensemble is changing the paradigm of contemporary vocal music. Described as "the Anonymous 4 of new music" by Opera News, Quince continually pushes the boundaries of vocal ensemble literature. As dedicated advocates of new music, Quince regularly commissions new works, providing wider exposure for the music of living composers.

Comprised of vocalists Liz Pearse (soprano), Kayleigh Butcher (mezzo soprano), Amanda DeBoer Bartlett (soprano), and Carrie Henneman Shaw (soprano), Quince thrives on unique musical challenges and genre-bending contemporary repertoire.

learn more at www.quince-ensemble.com

Program Note from Composer:

Why is it that people still like the story of Tristan und Isolde? It has been told repeatedly for almost 1000 years, and in many different versions, with all manner of strange details added or changed. "The greatest love story ever!" But why? Of course, there is excitement, drama, love, lust, shame, death, dragons. I think the real reason why is because the love of Tristan und Isolde begins by accident - they drink a love potion. They didn't mean to drink it, and they didn't mean to fall in love. They drink and - BAM! - it starts. It is almost a laboratory experiment into what love might be like without any of the complications of how real love begins or works-without the excitement, embarrassment, frustration, guilt, or competition present in the courtships of ordinary people.

I thought I might learn something about love if I could explore this in a piece, putting details abstracted from many different retellings of Tristan und Isolde next to texts that are more modern, more recognizable to us, more real. First I scoured the literature and took my favorite weird incidents from the originals; for example, in Marie de France's version Tristan carves his name on a stick for Isolde to find, she sees it and immediately knows what message Tristan means to convey, and that message - incredibly - is many pages long. Another example: Tristan and Isolde drink the potion, thinking it is wine, and Gottfried von Strassburg writes, dramatically, that it isn't wine they are drinking, but a cup of their never-ending sorrow. (This, near the chapter in which Gottfried lists all the other Germanic poets working in the 12th century, and then tells you how he rates among them.) I compiled the oddest incidents from these versions of their romance, took out all the names or technological information that would make the texts seem ancient, and put them next to stories by the contemporary author Lydia Davis. These stories are oddly similar to the Tristan stories - they are also about love, honor, and respect between two people, but they are much more recognizable to us.

I based my words on scraps of the text I found on the internet - thank you google translate! I do want to acknowledge the translations of Robert W. Hanning and Joan Ferrante, A. T. Hatto, and Alan S. Fedrick, whose versions of these texts I consulted more than once.

- David Lang

love fail

1. he was and she was

(words by David Lang, after Gottfried von Strassburg)

he was a blessed man
he was an understanding man
he was an ecstatic man
he was a joyful man
he was a delightful man
he was a free man
he was a studious man
he was a masterful man

she was so masterful
she was so diligent
she was so refined
she was so polite
she was so accomplished
she was so lovely
she was so excellent
she was so dexterous

she was so wise
she was so fair
she was so shining
she was so lovely
she was so studious
she was so versed
she was so young
she was so fair

he was a fair man
he was a blessed man
he was an admirable man
he was a successful man
he was a noble man
he was an excellent man
he was a worthy man
he was a cherished man

he was a persevering man (he was so persevering)
he was a learned man (he was so learned)
he was a skillful man (he was so skillful)
he was a strong man (he was so strong)
he was a skillful man (he was so skillful)
he was an excelling man (he was so excelling)
he was a fortunate man (he was so fortunate)
he was a rare man (he was so rare)

she was so sweet
she was so soft
she was so secret
she was so wondrous
she was so charming
she was so lovely
she was so good
she was so young

break #1

(words by David Lang, after Beroul)

three years

three years after it started

it ended

2. dureth

(words by Sir Thomas Malory)

the joy of love is too short,

and the sorrow thereof,

and what cometh thereof,

dureth over long.

3. A Different Man

(words by Lydia Davis)

At night he was a different man. If she knew him as

he was in the morning, at night she hardly recognized

him: a pale man, a gray man, a man in a brown sweater,

a man with dark eyes who kept his distance from her,

who took offense, who was not reasonable. In the morning,

he was a rosy king, gleaming, smooth-cheeked and smooth-

chinned, fragrant with perfumed talc, coming out into the

sunlight with a wide embrace in his royal red plaid robe...

4. the wood and the vine

(words by David Lang, after Marie de France)

now I'll tell you a story

that is also the truth –

it is the truth

the wood and the vine

we all know this story

We have heard it before

it was told to us by everyone

and everyone told it to you

a man and a woman

they loved so much

and were so true

and they suffered so much

and on a single day, they died.

their love was forbidden

he went back to the place

where he was born.

but being apart made him

sick with despair.

don't be surprised -

a lover grieves

when love is far away

sadness can make us all

sick with despair

he stayed there for years, until, at last,

he went back,

to get, to try, to hope

to get a message to his love

he hid in the woods
by where she lived
and found a path
where she might walk
he cut a branch and, on it,
he carved a single word -
his name -
and left it on the path
where she might find it.
then she would know the message
and she would know just what the message meant.

later she came along the same path
and saw the piece of wood
she knew exactly what it was
she saw the single word carved upon it
and she knew.

this is what she knew:

"dearest love
this is my message
I send it to you
I have waited for you
I have waited to see you
even now I am waiting for you in the woods

I cannot live without you
I cannot live without you

"you and I -
we are like the vine that winds itself around the branch
it twines and pulls and digs into the flesh,
so tight that the two of them become one
the two become one
if someone pulls the two apart then both will die.
so it is with us, my love, so it is with us.
you cannot live without me.
I cannot live without you.
I cannot live without you.
you cannot live without me."

she went a short way into the woods
and found him
and they wept.
they wept with joy when they were together
and they wept with sadness when they left.

later he remembered the joy and the sadness
and he wrote this song:

"the wood and the vine"

every word is true.
all true.

5. Right and Wrong
(words by Lydia Davis)

She knows she is right, but to say she is right is wrong,
in this case. To be correct and say so is wrong, in
certain cases.

She may be correct, and she may say so, in certain
cases. But if she insists too much, she becomes wrong,
so wrong that even her correctness becomes wrong,
by association. It is right to believe in what she thinks
is right, but to say what she thinks is right is wrong, in
certain cases.

She is right to act on her beliefs, in her life. But she is
wrong to report her right actions, in most cases. Then
even her right actions become wrong, by association.
If she praises herself, she may be correct in what she
says, but her saying it is wrong, in most cases, and thus
cancels it, or reverses it, so that although she was for a
particular act deserving of praise, she is no longer in
general deserving of praise.

6. you will love me
(words by David Lang, after
Gottfried von Strassburg)

you will love me
me, alone
above all others
above all other things
you will love me

we will live one life
we will die one death
we will share one joy
we will share one sorrow

it is not wine
it is our lasting sorrow
it is not wine
it is our never-ending anguish

and we drink it
we drink it

7. Forbidden Subjects (words by Lydia Davis)

Soon almost every subject they might want to talk about is associated with yet another unpleasant scene and becomes a subject they can't talk about, so that as time goes by there is less and less they can safely talk about, and eventually little else but the news and what they're reading, though not all of what they're reading. They can't talk about certain members of her family, his working hours, her working hours, rabbits, mice, dogs, certain foods, certain universities, hot weather, hot and cold room temperatures at night and in the day, lights on and lights off in the evening in summer, the piano, music in general, how much money he earns, what she earns, what she spends, etc. But one day, after they have been talking about a forbidden subject, though not the most dangerous of the forbidden subjects, she realizes it may be possible, sometimes, to say something calm and careful about a forbidden subject, so that it may once again become a subject that can be talked about, and then to say something calm and careful about another forbidden subject, so that there will be another subject that can be talked about once again, and that as more subjects can be talked about once again there will be, gradually, more talk between them, and that as there is more talk there will be more trust, and that when there is enough trust, they may dare to approach even the most dangerous of the forbidden subjects.

8. as love grows stronger (words by David Lang, after Gottfried von Strassburg)

as love grows stronger
love holds us closer

as love grows stronger
love holds us tight

as love grows stronger
as love grows stronger

we become more beautiful
to each other

this is the seed
from which love grows
from which love never dies

until....
until....

as it ever was
as it ever is
as it ever will be

break #2
(instrumental, conch shell)

9. The Outing
(words by Lydia Davis)

An outburst of anger near the road, a refusal to
speak on the path, a silence in the pine woods, a
silence across the old railroad bridge, an attempt
to be friendly in the water, a refusal to end the
argument on the flat stones, a cry of anger on
the steep bank of dirt, a weeping among the bushes.

10. I live in pain
(words by David Lang, after Beatriz, Contessa de Dia)
I live in pain

for someone I once had,
for someone I once wanted
for someone I once knew
for someone I once loved, without measure.
I see now that he left me
because I did not give him all my love
I see now I was wrong
and now I sleep alone

I want to hold him
in my naked arms
I want to lie beside him
in my bed
I want him more
than any long-forgotten lovers ever loved before
I want to give him everything

my heart
my love
my senses
my sight
my life

good friend, kind friend, fearless friend
when will I have you?
when will you lie beside me?
when will I give you my love?
you know how much I want you.
promise me
you will do what I say
please.
do what I say

11. Head, Heart
(words by Lydia Davis)

Heart weeps.
Head tries to help heart.
Head tells heart how it is, again:
You will lose the ones you love. They will all go.
But even the earth will go, someday.
Heart feels better, then.
But the words of head do not remain long in the
ears of heart.
Heart is so new to this.
I want them back, says heart.
Head is all heart has.
Help, head. Help, heart.

break #3

(words by David Lang, after Thomas of Britain, and the Yom Kippur liturgy)

if I have to drown, I know, that you will drown
if I have to burn, I know, that you will burn
if God wills it

if I have to bleed, I know, that you will bleed
if I have to be devoured, I know, that you
will be devoured
if God wills it

if I have to starve, I know, that you will starve
if I have to thirst, I know, that you will thirst
if I have to wander, all my days, I know,
that you will wander, all your days
if I have to suffer, I know, that you will suffer

if I have to be impoverished, I know,
that you will be impoverished
if I have to be degraded, I know,
that you will be degraded

if God wills it
if God wills it, so be it.

12. mild, light
(words by David Lang, after Richard Wagner)

mild, light
see him smile
see his eye, open –
do you see it?

he shines so bright
like a star, rising
do you see it? oh, yes, I see it

do you hear his heart?
do you smell his sweet breath?
do you? yes, I do

am I the only one
who hears this music?
oh, I hear it
it is so soft
it is so sad
it comes from him
through me, and up
and rises all around me

I hear it, I breathe it in
I drink it, It is so sweet

will we just fade?
buried in the raging storm?
buried beneath the ringing sound?

break #3

(words by David Lang, after Thomas of Britain, and the Yom Kippur liturgy)

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if I have to burn, I know, that you will burn
if God wills it

if I have to bleed, I know, that you will bleed
if I have to be devoured, I know, that you
will be devoured
if God wills it

if I have to starve, I know, that you will starve
if I have to thirst, I know, that you will thirst
if I have to wander, all my days, I know,
that you will wander, all your days
if I have to suffer, I know, that you will suffer

if I have to be impoverished, I know,
that you will be impoverished
if I have to be degraded, I know,
that you will be degraded

if God wills it
if God wills it, so be it.

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I hear it, I breathe it in
I drink it, It is so sweet

will we just fade?
buried in the raging storm?
buried beneath the ringing sound?
drowned
engulfed
unconscious
so sweet



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