

CALMUS Program Notes: *All The World's a Stage*

William Shakespeare, one of the most shining – and miraculous – figures in the history of all literature, died in 1616. To commemorate the 400th anniversary of his passing, we have created a special concert program inspired by the immortal “Bard of Avon.”

Despite Shakespeare’s universal appeal, there still remains some debate even today about the authenticity of his huge output. Due to the lack of reliable sources that exist to give clear evidence about his life, there is still a small group of conspiracy theorists who doubt that Shakespeare—who had grown up in the small village of Stratford-upon-Avon and likely had a modest education—could really be the one and only author of these texts. It is an imposing body of work, including comedies and tragedies as well as sonnets and long form poetry. The language he employs spans a variety of styles, ranging from the lowest forms of slang to the highest aristocratic vocabulary heard at the royal court.

When Shakespeare (who was also said to be a gifted businessman) started his career in London, the poet Robert Green verbally attacked him 1592: “There is an upstart Crow, beautified with our feathers, that with his Tygers hart wrapt in a Players hide, supposes he is as well able to bombast out a blanke verse as the best of you: and beeing an absolute Johannes fac totum, is in his owne conceit the onely Shake-scene in a countrey.” How wrong he was!

Since so many of Shakespeare’s texts have been set to music over the years, for us singers it is inspiring and fascinating to have all these mysteries! The question marks and subjective interpretations of the words written by this “foggy” figure who lived 400-years-ago only adds to the allure as we try to bring meaning to his poetry through song.

Our approach with this program was to find music that is connected with Shakespeare. Quite honestly, as easy as the idea of a whole Shakespeare program may sound, it was actually fairly difficult to make it work! There is no way for a quintet to specialize on just one topic, or for us to try to sing a complete play *a cappella*. So we decided shine the spotlight on excerpts of some of the great works which we framed with settings of some of his beautiful sonnets.

It is not surprising that we found a natural connection with English music of the 16th and 17th centuries. In particular, Henry Purcell has written some of the most moving settings, and since Purcell was long considered to be England’s greatest composer, what better “partner” to have than England’s greatest poet?!?

But we have also been very excited to discover the wealth of contemporary music based on Shakespeare, which is colorful and rich, and actually quite natural considering the four or five centuries that have passed between when the texts and the music were composed.

Some composers in this program might be unknown to you and the selection might seem a bit “cutting edge.” But— in keeping with Shakespeare’s art in his use of language—the music also shows this variety: a polyphonic madrigal-prologue by Orlando Gibbons; baroque music by Henry Purcell; and romantic choral sonorities by Ralph Vaughan Williams and Charles Wood.

Then from the music of our time, we hear many different contemporary effects and styles: John Tavener's slow and meditative music; Jaakko Mätyjärvis harmonic surprises; the groovy arrangements of Jussi Chydenius; and the wonderful jazzy settings of Nancy Wertsch and Nils Lindberg. And when we sing four unique versions of the poem *Full Fathom Five*, it will be clear to you, how individually inspiring Shakespeare's words can be!