

**I have become another child.
I wake to see the world go wild.**

Allen Ginsberg



Songs With Words

Malakoff Kowalski

I suspect nothing has ever captivated me quite as much as collecting and organizing miniatures: piano works dissociated from their larger cycles and isolated into discrete pieces. I'm drawn to slow, solemn musical poems that stand apart from the platitudes and mannerisms of their Impressionist or Romantic-era origins, making them feel timeless.

A few years ago, as I listened to Robert Schumann's fourth *Night Piece* in F major, I was struck by how the ascending chords in the third measure reminded me of Elvis Presley's *Can't Help Falling in Love*. From that point on, I could never hear Schumann's piece without imagining it being sung. It seemed to me that Schumann in 1839 had unintentionally composed something like a pop song, or folk jazz. Whatever it was, it was begging for a voice and some lyrics.

At the time, I was working on a film score that incorporated Allen Ginsberg's Beat poetry. I became particularly interested in his non-political side: those quiet, vulnerable, self-reflective poems mostly overshadowed by his more iconic works. Flipping through a Ginsberg anthology at my desk, I happened upon *Refrain (Shadow Changes into Bone)*. As an experiment, I set the entire poem

to Schumann, and found that Ginsberg's unaltered text nested perfectly—syllable by syllable, line by line, verse by verse—within the melody and harmony of that same *Night Piece*. A singer-songwriter ballad was born, delivered in a way I'd never seen happen before.

It took about five years to birth twelve songs in this manner. They were assembled from both famous and lesser-known miniatures by Frédéric Chopin, Robert Schumann, Aram Khachaturian, Maurice Ravel, Edvard Grieg, Amy Beach, Germaine Tailleferre, Claude Debussy, and Gabriel Fauré. I kept unearthing intimate, ageless poems from Ginsberg's oeuvre, and for some reason, again and again, these poems, with little or no reworking, functioned very naturally as song lyrics. The quiet, inner-directed vocals strictly followed the piano's motifs and themes, while the piano parts, in turn, stuck to their original versions, with only the most imperceptible of alterations here and there.

I was very fortunate that three of my closest musician friends played the piano on this album. Together, we transformed a mere concept into actual music. The present performances feature Igor Levit and Johanna Summer, both for the first time

on an upright piano prepared with felt (sourdine), and Chilly Gonzales, playing the works of composers he's never recorded before. Three personalities with contrasting pianistic spirits, as distinct as the material we engaged with here: Igor, whom I love above all for his three great Bs: Busoni, Bach, Brahms. Johanna, who improvises between jazz and classical so freely and so thoroughly that it makes me dizzy with joy. And "Gonzo," who with *Solo Piano* and its successors, has done more for contemporary miniatures than any other living composer.

Beyond their methodological origin, these songs feel to me like they have inherited something from Tom Waits, Jim Morrison, and David Bowie, infused with the musicality of Bill Evans, Kurt Weill, and Michel Legrand.

Ironically, none of Felix Mendelssohn's or Fanny Hensel's *Songs Without Words* appear on this album, even though its title obviously derives from their famous piano cycles. Some two hundred years ago, Mendelssohn and his sister detached the established "art song" from classical singing, creating a new genre. This record is my attempt at a Mendelssohnian gesture: no less than the founding of a new, previously

unactualized genre. While that may sound immodest, it's also a dispassionate designation for music that, while having never appeared in this form, whether in classical music, jazz, or pop, had always been hiding in plain sight. And so I call these twelve pieces simply: *Songs With Words*.

M.K.



Songs With Words

Malakoff Kowalski

Es ist nur eine Vermutung, aber es könnte sein, dass ich nichts jemals so vertieft habe wie das Sammeln und Ordnen von Klavierminiaturen. Introvertiert und losgelöst aus den größeren Zyklen, denen sie entstammen, isoliert als autonome Stücke. Eher langsam und getragen ziehen mich diese Gedichte aus Tönen an, meist sind sie impressionistisch oder aus der Romantik und frei von epochenbedingten Floskeln und Manierismen – was eine schemenhafte Zeitlosigkeit schafft.

Bei einem der *Nachtstücke* von Robert Schumann, dem vierten in F-Dur, passierte vor einigen Jahren etwas Unerwartetes: Gleich im dritten Takt erinnerten mich die aufsteigenden Akkorde an Elvis Presley's *Can't Help Falling in Love*. Immer an der gleichen Stelle funktionierte das Stück für mich nur noch mit Gesang im Ohr. Mir wurde klar, dass Schumann im Jahr 1839 in Wahrheit einen Pop-Song komponiert hatte. Oder war es so etwas wie Folk-Jazz? Ein Song jedenfalls ohne Text und Gesang.

Für eine Filmmusik war ich damals mit Allen Ginsberg und seiner Beat-Lyrik befasst. Vor allem seine unpolitischen Gedichte interessierten mich, seine nur wenig beachteten, verletzlichen, dem Selbst zugewandten, leisen Texte. Und weil sie gerade auf meinem

Schreibtisch lagen, suchte ich in seinen Sammelbänden nach ein paar Strophen, die sich dafür eigneten, sie singend mit Schumann zu paaren. Als Versuchsanordnung. Ich stieß auf das Gedicht *Refrain* (*Shadow Changes into Bone*), und es gelang mir, den gesamten Text von Ginsberg Silbe für Silbe, Zeile für Zeile, Vers für Vers ohne Abwandlung auf Melodie und Harmonie von Schumanns *Nachtstück* zu montieren. Ein Singer-Songwriter-Lied war entstanden, wie ich es vorher nicht gekannt hatte.

Es dauerte ungefähr fünf Jahre, bis sich zwölf neue Songs auf diese Weise arrangieren ließen; aus berühmten und weniger verbreiteten Miniaturen von Frédéric Chopin, Robert Schumann, Aram Khatschaturjan, Maurice Ravel, Edvard Grieg, Amy Beach, Germaine Tailleferre, Claude Debussy und Gabriel Fauré. Und die Worte dazu? Ich kann nicht erklären, wie, aber immer wieder aufs Neue entdeckte ich in Ginsbergs Sammlungen intime, aus der Zeit gefallene Gedichte, die fast ohne Umgestaltung als Songtexte gesungen werden konnten. Die Klavierwerke wiederum, als Setzung, wurden bis auf wenige, kaum merkliche Ausnahmen ebenfalls in ihren unveränderten Originalfassungen gespielt. Der Gesang folgt hierbei strikt dem, was das Klavier in seinen Motiven und Themen vorgibt.

Dass sich drei meiner engsten – nicht nur musikalischen – Freunde zusammenschlossen, das Klavier zu spielen bei diesem Vorhaben, war ein riesengroßes Glück. Gemeinsam verwandelten wir eine gedankliche Studie in gegenständliche Musik. Zu hören sind auf den vorliegenden Aufnahmen Igor Levit und Johanna Summer – beide zum ersten Mal überhaupt an einem Upright-Klavier mit dämpfendem Filz zwischen Saiten und Hämmern; und Chilly Gonzales mit Fremdkompositionen, wie er sie bislang noch nie eingespielt hat. Drei Persönlichkeiten mit pianistischen Wesenszügen, die ähnlich kontrastieren wie das Material, mit dem wir uns beschäftigt haben: Igor, den ich vor allem für seine drei großen Bs liebe: Busoni, Bach, Brahms. Johanna, die zwischen Jazz und Klassik so frei und konsistent improvisiert, dass mir schwindelig wird vor Glück. Und »Gonzo«, der mit *Solo Piano* und dessen Nachfolgern mehr für die zeitgenössische Miniatur getan hat als jeder andere lebende Komponist.

Es wird mir kaum gelingen, dieser Musik mehr als ihre Entstehungsgeschichte hinzuzufügen, um sie zu charakterisieren. Müsste ich in etwa beschreiben, wie sie auf mich wirkt, und würde ich mich sehr weit vorwagen, wären vielleicht Tom Waits, Jim Morrison oder David Bowie Teil meiner

Assoziationen – verknüpft mit Bill Evans, Kurt Weill oder Michel Legrand.

Erstaunlicherweise hat keines der *Lieder ohne Worte* von Felix Mendelssohn oder Fanny Hensel Verwendung gefunden auf diesem Album. Dabei wäre ohne ihre bedeutenden Klavierzyklen die Anlehnung des Titels »Lieder mit Worten« kaum denkbar. Mendelssohn und seine Schwester lösten damals das Lied vom Gesang und schufen mit diesem Bruch eine neue Gattung. Dass auch die »Lieder mit Worten« im Begriff sind, ein neues, bislang unbekanntes Genre zu begründen, ist ein nicht sehr bescheidener Gedanke. Dass hier allerdings eine neue Musik zu hören ist, eine, die weder in der Klassik noch im Jazz oder im Pop jemals zuvor in dieser Form entwickelt wurde, ist einerseits schwer zu glauben, andererseits eine sehr nüchterne Betrachtung dieser zwölf Stücke. Ich nenne sie *Songs With Words*.

M.K.



1) Dry Old Rose

Oh dry old rose of God,
that with such bleak perfume
changed images to blood
and body to a tomb,

what fragrance you have lost,
and are now withered mere
crimson myth of dust
and recollection sere

of an unfading garden
whereof the myriad life
and all that flock in blossom,
none other met the knife.

Paterson, early 1950

Piano: Johanna Summer

Written by Allen Ginsberg (Originally Titled:
An Imaginary Rose in a Book)

Vocal Arrangement: Malakoff Kowalski

Music by Robert Schumann:
Variations in E-flat major on an Original
Theme "Ghost Variations"

2) Shadow Changes into Bone

The air is dark, the night is sad,
I lie sleepless and I groan.
Nobody cares when a man goes mad:
He is sorry, God is glad.
Shadow changes into bone.

Every shadow has a name;
When I think of mine I moan,
I hear rumors of such fame.
Not for pride, but only shame,
Shadow changes into bone.

When I blush I weep for joy,
And laughter drops from me like a stone:
The aging laughter of the boy
To see the ageless dead so coy.
Shadow changes into bone.

Paterson, August 1948

Piano: Igor Levit

Written by Allen Ginsberg (Originally Titled: *Refrain*)
Poem Adaptation & Vocal Arrangement: Malakoff Kowalski
Music by Robert Schumann:
Nachtstück (Night Piece) in D-flat major op. 23/3

3) When I Died, Love

When I died, love, when I died
my heart was broken in your care;
I never suffered love so fair
as now I suffer and abide
when I died, love, when I died.

When I died, love, when I died
I wearied in an endless maze
that men have walked for centuries,
as endless as the gate was wide
when I died, love, when I died.

When I died, love, when I died
there was a war in the upper air:
all that happens, happens there;
there was an angel at my side
when I died, love, when I died.

Paterson, August 1948

Piano: Igor Levit

Written by Allen Ginsberg (Originally Titled: A Western Ballad)

Vocal Arrangement: Malakoff Kowalski

Music by Frédéric Chopin: Prélude in E minor op. 28/4



4) See the World Go Wild

I speak of love that comes to mind:
The moon is faithful, although blind;
She moves in thought she cannot speak.
Perfect care has made her bleak.

I never dreamed the sea so deep,
The earth so dark; so long my sleep,
I have become another child.
I wake to see the world go wild.

1945–1949

Piano: Chilly Gonzales

Written by Allen Ginsberg
(Originally Titled: *An Eastern Ballad*)
Poem Adaptation & Vocal Arrangement:
Malakoff Kowalski
Music by Frédéric Chopin:
Prélude in C minor op. 28/20
Musical Arrangement:
Chilly Gonzales & Malakoff Kowalski

5) Interlude #A

Composed & Performed by Malakoff Kowalski (Solo Piano)

6) A Strange Wild Leaf

I went in the forest to look for a sign
Fortune to tell and thought to refine;
My green valentine, my green valentine,
What do I know of my green valentine?

I found a strange wild leaf on a vine
Shaped like a heart and as green as was mine,
My green valentine, my green valentine,
How did I use my green valentine?

Bodies I've known and visions I've seen,
Leaves that I gathered as I gather this green
Valentine, valentine, valentine, valentine;
Thus did I use my green valentine.

Madhouses and jailhouses where I shined
Empty apartment beds where I pined,
O desolate rooms! My green valentine,
Where is the heart in which you were outlined?

Souls and nights and dollars and wine,
Old love and remembrance—I resign
All cities, all jazz, all echoes of Time,
But what shall I do with my green valentine?

Much have I seen, and much am I blind,
But none other than I has a leaf of this kind.
Where shall I send you, to what knowing mind,
My green valentine, my green valentine?

Yesterday's love, tomorrow's more fine?
All tonight's sadness in your design.
What does this mean, my green valentine?
Regret, O regret, my green valentine.

Chiapas, 1954

Piano: Johanna Summer

Written by Allen Ginsberg (Originally Titled: *Green Valentine Blues*)
Vocal Arrangement: Malakoff Kowalski
Music by Claude Debussy: La plus que lente

7) The Weight of the World Is Love

The weight of the world
is love.

Under the burden
of solitude

the weight we carry
is love.

Who can deny?
In dreams
it touches
the body,
a miracle,
till born
in human—

looks out of the heart
burning with purity—

but we carry the weight
wearily,
and so must rest
in the arms of love
at last,
must rest in the arms
of love.

no sleep
without dreams

of love—

the final wish
is love

yes,
that's what
I always wanted,
to return
to the body
where I was born.

San Jose, 1954

Piano: Igor Levit

Written by Allen Ginsberg (Originally Titled: Song)

Poem Adaptation & Vocal Arrangement:

Malakoff Kowalski

Music by Gabriel Fauré:

Romance sans paroles in A-flat major op. 17/3

8) Until They Try

Many seek and never see,
anyone can tell them why.
O they weep and O they cry
and never take until they try
unless they try it in their sleep
and never some until they die.
I ask many, they ask me.
This is a great mystery.

East Harlem, June–July 1948

Piano: Johanna Summer

Written by Allen Ginsberg (Originally Titled: The Eye Altering Alters All)

Poem Adaptation & Vocal Arrangement: Malakoff Kowalski

Music by Germaine Tailleferre: Valse lente

9) An Empty Hungry Ghost

Don't get angry with me
You might die tomorrow
I'm an empty hungry ghost
Any spare change I can borrow?

Don't get angry with me
Full of God tomorrow
Could get sorry you got mad,
wanna be the God of sorrow?

Don't get angry with me
War starts tomorrow
I'll get bombed You'll get shot
in the eye with Interdependent Arrow

Don't get angry with me
Hell's hot tomorrow
If we're burned up now inflamed
Could pass aeons in cold horror

Don't get angry with me
We'll be worms tomorrow
Both wriggling in the mud
cut in two by the ploughman's harrow

Don't get angry with me —
Who'll we be tomorrow?
who knows who we are today?
Better meditate & pray,
Tila, Mila, Marpa, Naro.

August 27, 1996

Piano: Johanna Summer

Written by Allen Ginsberg

(Originally Titled: Don't Get Angry with Me)

Vocal Arrangement: Malakoff Kowalski

Music by Amy Beach: Young Birches op. 128/2

Musical Arrangement:

Johanna Summer & Malakoff Kowalski

10) Interlude #B

Composed & Performed by Malakoff Kowalski *(Solo Piano)*

11) One Day

You'll bare your bones you'll grow you'll pray you'll only know
When the light appears, boy, when the light appears
You'll sing & you'll love you'll praise blue heavens above
When the light appears, boy, when the light appears
You'll whimper & you'll cry you'll get yourself sick and sigh
You'll sleep & you'll dream you'll only know what you mean
When the light appears, boy, when the light appears
You'll come & you'll go, you'll wander to and fro
You'll go home in despair you'll wonder why'd you care
You'll stammer & you'll lie you'll ask everybody why
You'll love & you'll grieve & one day you'll come believe
When the light appears, boy, when the light appears

May 3, 1987, 2:30 A.M.

Piano: Igor Levit

Written by Allen Ginsberg *(Originally Titled: When the Light Appears)*

Poem Adaptation & Vocal Arrangement: Malakoff Kowalski

Music by Edvard Grieg: Lyric Pieces op. 65 – No. 5 Ballad in C minor



12) The Nightingale at Night

A very Dove will have her love
ere the Dove has died;
the spirit, vanity approve,
will even love in pride;

and cannot love, and yet can hate,
spirit to fulfill;
the spirit cannot watch and wait,
the Hawk must have his kill.

There is a Gull that rolls alone
over billows loud;
the Nightingale at night will moan
under her soft shroud.

East Harlem, July 1948

Piano: Chilly Gonzales

Written by Allen Ginsberg (Originally Titled: A Very Dove)

Poem Adaptation & Vocal Arrangement: Malakoff Kowalski

Music by Germaine Tailleferre: Premières prouesses – No. 1 (intro) &
Suite burlesque – No. 1 Dolente (verses) & No. 3 Mélancolique (mid section)

Musical Arrangement: Malakoff Kowalski & Alexandra Skaya

13) Dawn

The whole blear world
of smoke and twisted steel
around my head in a railroad
car, and my mind wandering
past the rust into futurity:
I saw the sun go down
in a carnal and primeval
world, leaving darkness
to cover my railroad train
because the other side of the
world was waiting for dawn.

New York–Paterson, November 1949

Piano: Johanna Summer

Written by Allen Ginsberg

(Originally Titled: *Sunset*)

Poem Adaptation & Vocal Arrangement:

Malakoff Kowalski

Music by Maurice Ravel:

Valses nobles et sentimentales M 61 – No. 2

14) Awake

Now mind is clear
as a cloudless sky.
Time then to make a
home in wilderness.

What have I done but
wander with my eyes
in the trees? So I
will build: wife,
family, and seek
for neighbors.

And maybe make an image
of my wandering, a little
image—shrine by the
roadside to signify
to traveler that I live
here in the wilderness
awake and at home.

Paterson, mid-1950

Piano: Chilly Gonzales

Written by Allen Ginsberg

(Originally Titled: *A Desolation*)

Poem Adaptation & Vocal Arrangement:

Malakoff Kowalski

Music by Aram Khachaturian:

Children's Album I "Pictures of Childhood" – No. 1

Produced by Malakoff Kowalski

Recorded at Brunnen Intl., Berlin in 2023 / 2024

Mix: Renaud Letang, Studio Ferber, Paris

Mixing Assistant: Nicolas Frey

Additional Engineering: Martin Kistner & Philipp Nedel, B-Sharp Studio

Mastering: Martin Englert, Elektromos Studios (Additional Mixing *When I Died, Love*)

Performed on a Krauss Upright Piano (Stuttgart, 1910)

Tuning: Johannes Bunge

Restoration: Jörg Gohl

Notations: Clemens F. Bigge

Artwork: Sebastian Rohde, Firma Freimauer

Polaroid Photography: Luc Dupuy

Black & White Photography: Markus C. Hurek

Gatefold Keyboard Photography: Julija Goyd

Polaroid Post-Production: Leo Kaufmann

English Translation: Adam Traynor

Editorial: Texthouse & Ronja Quast

Supported by Initiative Musik gGmbH with project funds from the Federal Government Commissioner for Culture and Media (Germany)

All lyrics courtesy The Estate of Allen Ginsberg

Published by May King Poetry Music

(Administered by Music of Virtual in North America & by BMG Rights Management in the rest of the world)

Music Publishers: Germaine Tailleferre: Editions Henry Lemoine, Paris

Aram Khachaturian: © 1949 by Anglo-Soviet Music Press Ltd., London

© by Musikverlag Hans Sikorski, Hamburg

Courtesy Musikverlag Hans Sikorski GmbH, Berlin

Malakoff Kowalski: Edition It Sounds / Universal Music Publ. (GEMA)

Johanna Summer: ACT Music Publishing (GEMA)

Jason "Chilly Gonzales" Beck: Gentle Threat Ltd (SACEM)

Johanna Summer appears courtesy of ACT

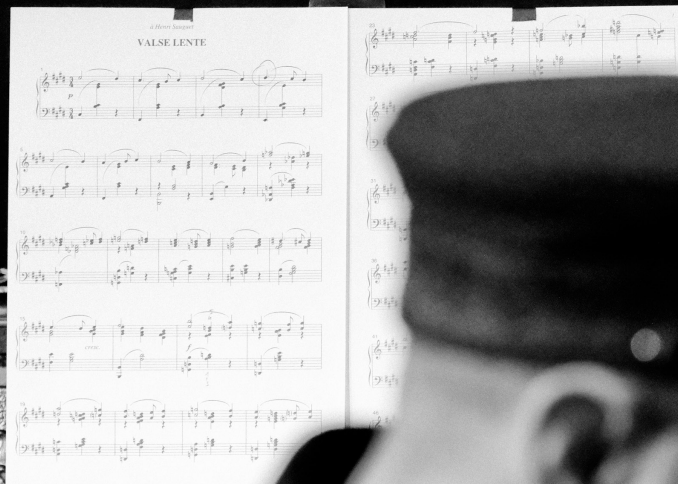
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Thank you, Nina Pohl

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di Robert Schumann

VALE LENTE



The image shows a man in a dark uniform and a peaked cap, looking down at a sheet of music. The sheet is open, showing two pages of musical notation. The left page is titled "VALE LENTE" and is by Robert Schumann. The music is written for piano (p) and is in 3/4 time. The right page continues the piece. The man is in the foreground, slightly out of focus, with his head bowed. The background shows a decorative metal surface, possibly part of a piano or a desk.