

Ayre by Osvaldo Golijov & Berio Folk Songs
Interview with John Schaefer, Dawn Upshaw and Osvaldo Golijov

General

1. How long has your collaboration been so far?

OG: 6 years, I think...

DU: ...maybe longer. We first met through Osvaldo's piece *Lúa Descolorida*, which ended up in his [*St. Mark*] *Passion* but was originally written for voice and piano. That was our first meeting.

2. Osvaldo, what is it in Dawn's voice that continually draws you back to it?

OG: That's the beauty of a long-time collaboration, that you discover more and more. In *Lúa Descolorida* I didn't know Dawn. I was ecstatic that she had called and asked for a piece. I don't think I had ever seen her live, but of course I cherished her voice in the Gorecki Third Symphony. That was the Dawn I imagined, this incredibly pure soprano, with this stillness in her sound. That's why the first song I wrote for her is about that. I remember being completely blown away when we rehearsed the first time with Dawn and Gil Kalish. Just once she held a B, which is the most transcendental note – the middle B, not high B – and I saw a rainbow. It was one of those great moments in the life of a musician.

And then came all the other Dawns. Little by little I realized that she has this unbelievable low range – rich and dark and dense. But because of the Gorecki, and because of her great performance as the Angel in Messiaen's [opera] *St. Francis*, people think of just one Dawn Upshaw. Also because of her American popular songs. But there are so many other Dawns. Throughout the years I've been discovering them. That's the joy of collaborating – discovering more and more possibilities.

3. So you took it upon yourself to write a piece that shows off the different ranges of Dawn's voice. Did you have any models?

OG: I think that Cathy Berberian was Dawn's ancestor in the sense that she wasn't simply a mezzo-soprano – she was all those different voices. In her records you hear the many voices of Cathy Berberian. Both in classical and popular music there are very few people who have that gift of being multi-voiced. Also composers – there are many composers who have only one thing that they do with variations for their whole life, and then there are other composers like Bach or Beethoven who have so many voices. Both Dawn and Cathy Berberian have this immense range.

DU: The interesting thing is that I never knew I had a lot of these voices he's talking about until he wrote something for me to do, or described it. I don't understand how he knew I could even make certain sounds without hearing them first.

4. What does *Ayre* mean?

OG: *Ayre* is "air" or "melody" [in medieval Spanish], in the old musical sense, but also air [that we breathe].

CD tr. 12-22 - Berio Folk Songs

5. *Ayre* has a direct musical ancestor in the folksong settings by Berio...

OG: *Ayre* incorporates all of Berio's ensemble (Berio uses two percussionists), plus I have, the accordion, laptop and so forth because I feel that the concept of folk music is changing. Folk today is not the same as folk in 1968.

6. Is folk music a purely traditional heritage or does the performer also play a role?

OG: People talk about folk music, but in every village there is one great singer. I was of course thinking of Dawn but also thinking of great folk divas in this area, people like Fairuz – the great Lebanese singer. She recorded an album of Christian Arab Good Friday songs. Two of them I re-arranged for this collection, but it was her incredible voice that I think Dawn incorporated. Also the Israeli singer Ofra Haza, and the Greek singer Savina Yannatou and Jordi Savall's wife Montserrat Figueras. People think folk music is just floating in the air, but there is also the guy with the guitar or a woman with a throat. There is authorship. There is always somebody who brings the music to the people.

7. Did you think of recording Berio's Folk Songs, Dawn?

DU: The original idea was to perform the pieces together and then record them. So we always hoped to convert it all into a recording project.

8. Is it odd after all those years that you're treading on someone else's ground?

DU: I'm very aware of the history of the piece, and that it's important for me to think about. But a great piece of music is one that many, many people will be able to enjoy for a long time. I hope that *Ayre*, too, will outlive me. With all my respect and understanding for history, there's also the privilege of carrying on a tradition.

CD tr.1 - Dawn, St. John's Day:

9. *Ayre* begins with a song in the Sephardic tradition with an almost shrill quality.

DU: Osvaldo wanted me to imagine that I was standing on a soap-box to get attention, to make people listen to my story, and to do this the whole time. It's really like shouting the story out to a crowd, and so it's intentionally slightly shrill and very declamatory. That's also how Osvaldo has orchestrated the piece, and in the percussive sounds he gets from the entire group of instruments.

10. Osvaldo, could you explain the character of the song?

OG: This isn't a song. I found the lyrics in a book of ballads of Sephardic Jews, and then I heard snippets of Sephardic street cries, of people selling things in a village. And so I took one of those street calls and repeated when I worked with the gypsy band Taraf de Haïdouks. I saw that their ballads are like melodic formulas that vary a little bit each time as they tell a story. It's something between story-telling and music. I wanted this first song to conjure up the world of the whole piece. So I don't

consider it to be a song – it’s more of a dramatic situation. I imagine a medieval fair with lots of attractions, like the bear and the bearded women! The singer has to compete for attention with all these others, with the fire-eater and so forth. Then you’re in semi-chaos. You’ve entered into the atmosphere of this piece.

CD tr.2 - A mother roasted her child:

11. The second song, “A mother roasted her child” sounds like a lullaby.

DU: I think the juxtaposition of the terrible thought expressed in the text with this straightforward, simple, beautiful tune is so touching. It reaches into your gut.

OG: Yes, but the tune isn’t so simple. It’s one of the most well-known Sephardic tunes, found in many music collections and albums. I was taken by it immediately, even before knowing the words. It’s very asymmetrical: a phrase of seven bars followed by a phrase of five. It always comes back to a sort of balance, like a pendulum, but it’s irregular.

12. The lyrics of ‘A mother roasted her child’ seem very strange to us, so where does the tale come from?

OG: That’s another incredible thing. I said: “What is this?” How can one come up with a lyric like this? “A mother roasted and ate her cherished son, and the son says: ‘Look at my eyes, mother, I learned the Torah with them. Look at my mouth, I learned the law with it’.” It alludes to the Lamentations of Jeremiah, which basically says: Look at the city that stood so proud, and now mothers are eating their children. That’s what happens when war ravages a region. To me, the marriage of these words and the beautiful melody is tremendous.

CD tr. 3 - Walls are encircling the land:

13. the third song in this collection is Sardinian. People know your voice as pure and angelic – and suddenly they hear this.

DU: The text is so angry. It’s about war and is a protest. It took lots of experimenting to come up with the final idea. Maybe not final, but at least in the moment of the recording we could decide to go with it. It was something from the gut, very much from the center of my being, or as close as I could get. Osvaldo was very specific and very helpful in getting me there.

14. Osvaldo, did you write down instructions in the score? How did you come to the specific sound?

OG: These are things that theoretically could be notated, by inventing a new symbol. But they all come from real life, from my experience of witnessing huge demonstrations in Argentina, with drums – boom-boom, and thousands of people, not singing. It’s like a human ocean coming through the streets. And it’s a very scary thing. Or even soccer matches. It comes from that, and also from listening to the Sardinian music that Berio himself listened to, and paying attention to how they change the resonance of the vowels.

15. What is the origin of this song?

OG: I thought it was anonymous. But when we asked a Sardinian translator, he said no, this is almost like a popular anthem in Sardinia. It was written during some feudal conflict late in the 18th century by a man called Francesco Ignazio Mannu.

16. Is this song representative of a subcurrent in Ayre as a cycle?

OG: It relates to a specific situation in Sardinia, but this piece, *Ayre*, has a subcurrent – the whole Middle Eastern drama. The line “Walls are encircling the land” relates perfectly to the situation of Israel and Palestine. So, it’s also a way of making a statement obliquely.

17. Osvaldo, you’ve worked with both Arabic and Jewish Sephardic melodies and texts, also with gypsy ensembles. In 1492, Jews, Moors and gypsies were all expelled from Spain. Perhaps there’s a common historical thread between them.

OG: Absolutely. I lived in Jerusalem for three years and was in contact with three cultures and their musics – Christian, Jewish and Arab. There is a song later on, number six, where the melody is sung twice, but with Dawn uttering it in different ways. You go from a very Christian feeling to a completely Arabic feeling. I wanted to explore how little you have to change in order to cross the border from one culture to another. The extreme case was where I don’t change anything.

CD tr.5 – Nani:

18. There’s another Sephardic song called “Nani”. Here also the lyrics seem not to be typical.

OG: It’s a lullaby but multi-layered. First the mother in very high spirits says: Sleep my child, sleep, I hear your father coming. Then the father says: Open the door to me, wife, I’m so tired from working all day in the fields! And then she says: No. I know that you are coming from the house of your new love. So it’s also about jealousy. There’s a fantastic lecture by Federico García Lorca where he decodes many of these Spanish lullabies. This is one clear example. Another is where the mother says: Sleep child, because your father’s home so the monster cannot enter, but she’s actually singing to her lover who’s waiting outside. So there’s a whole collection of lullabies that are seemingly innocent and have all these layers beneath. Another reason to include this one is all the amazing melismas. In terms of the architecture of *Ayre*, you hear Dawn sounding like a wounded animal in number three, then disappearing in number four and coming back as this almost celestially beautiful voice in number five. It’s a kind of theatrical effect to say: Oh, look what she can do!

CD tr.6 - My love

19. How does the change of character from Christian to Arabic come about? Dawn, is it a matter of the notes, or the way you sing them?

DU: The notes don’t change at all. It’s a matter of placing my sound in a different resonating chamber. That plus a lot of color changes and the way I use the consonants. Changing because the expression changes.

20. This is an interesting piece in two-part form: a funky eastern Mediterranean dance that alternates with a melody that Dawn sings.

OG: The melody that Dawn sings I took from the Fairuz record of traditional Good Friday songs. The other theme I made up for contrast, because the love there is for Christ – it's not a sensual or sexual love. To contrast that with a bazaar, with the violence, with the anger, with the non-spiritual aspects is putting everything together, in a sense, because that's how it is there, in the Middle East.

21. You seemed to have concentrated on the Mediterranean aspect of the song?

OG: In a way my piece is a journey with little detours – the two Gustavo songs, which are Argentinian. Otherwise it almost goes from Spain by foot all the way to Jerusalem, along the Mediterranean. Through Italy to Lebanon, and then you arrive at the holy city of these three cultures.

22. It seems like you were looking back to Spain before 1492, when the three cultural groups - Jewish, Arabic and Christian - lived in relative harmony with each other.

OG: Yes, in as much harmony as people living in New York City today. With problems and some barbs between ethnic groups, but they ride the same subway and eat each other's food. I've seen this happening in the two countries where I've lived before here: Argentina and Israel. One thing that always surprises me, because I've lived through it, is how fragile civilization is – this coexistence. You go to a wedding of a different ethnic group; Jews go to eat in Arab restaurants. All that works, but that fabric that seems so normal, and takes so long to be built up – it can unravel so quickly. The piece is at least a little bit about that.

CD tr.7 - My eyes weep

23. One song that comes from the eastern end of the Mediterranean is “My eyes weep”. Is it a Christian song?

OG: Yes, it's Christian, but I discovered it through Fairuz. So it's a Christian-Arab song of Easter, of Good Friday. I heard it sung by Fairuz and a choir, and basically transcribed the choir for the instruments and did a little variation. The whole reason for this song is when Dawn enters: from her entrance to the end is one of the most beautiful melodies I have ever heard, almost like a feather floating and doing these little loops in the air, and reinventing itself and never landing. It's like an arabesque. And every time I hear it, sung by Fairuz or by Dawn, I can't breathe – because they don't breathe. It's like circular breathing. There are so many reasons why a composer composes. Like what Picasso used to say to critics: The whole reason for this painting was that apple in the corner, and nobody even noticed it. To me the beauty of this particular piece was that I did it so fast I didn't have time to think. I said: “I love this tune, I'll put it here, this apple...” Sometime it's about purely sensual things, sometime a purely spiritual thing – like a little journal of an intense month in one's life.

24. Are these melodies all melismatic?

DU: No. Many of them are much more spoken. “My eyes weep” has a particular tone that comes completely from the text. Working on the pronunciation was very important in my preparation. Osvaldo played so many different things for me, when the ideas were just swimming in his brain, but I

remember the moment when he played this and I was so moved. It may be my favorite moment in the whole piece.

OG: It's obvious in number three: that's Dawn Upshaw. But the color of your voice in this song is something I've never heard in any of your other records or performances. Something I think you have inside you and didn't know.

DU: Yes, I was happy to open the door into this amazing place I've never been before.

Trilogy of tracks:

CD tr. 8. Be a string, water, to my guitar

CD tr. 9. Untie your ribbons

CD tr. 10. O God, where shall I find you?

25. There's a trilogy of songs in *Ayre* that are linked together: One, which is completely spoken, is followed by Gustavo Santaolalla's piece, then comes another song which alludes to poetry spoken earlier. What is it like going back and forth from one thing to another, while trying to make one cohesive statement?

DU: Actually in that part of the program – I'm thinking now of the performances we did – I felt like there was a real flow to it. What I loved most was that I would walk just a few steps so that I was close to Gustavo, for instance, so that I went from one intimate moment of speaking the poem to the intimate music making moment with Gustavo, just the two of us. That's also a unique moment in the piece, the only time with just two instruments. And then with this cry returning to the poem a bit, but afterwards this cry to God.

26. How do you do that live, since on the recording there is a layering of voices?

DU: I'm singing to processed Dawn – the laptop plays something we've pre-recorded and I sing with it.

27. Osvaldo, do you see a link between these three songs?

OG: The piece brings all these different moods, and then suddenly there's a descent into darkness, into an interior place, a wrenching place that surprised even me. But I did want to have a song that would show "many Dawns", the simultaneity of Dawn in different spiritual stages: the Dawn that reads, the reading of the Sardinian poem, the Dawn who's desperately seeking God and crying in the desert, and then the Dawn who has found God. That's what it is about.

28. The song is called "O God, where shall I find you", drawing on a 12th-century poem by Yehudah Halevy

OG: I think it's a counterpoint, so the Jewish medieval poet is a counterpoint to the Palestinian contemporary poet. I thought of that dialogue across the centuries and how the oppressors and oppressed exchange places throughout history, and how we are all one.

CD tr.11 - Ariadne in her labyrinth

29. The conclusion of *Ayre* is a remarkable piece – the longest song in the work. Dawn, you seem to spend a lot of time doing vocalise.

DU: I'm vocalizing, but it's all written out, though I take some liberty. It was one of the greatest challenges for me, that last piece, but also, once it hooked in, one of the greatest joys.

30. Osvaldo, you spent much of the previous half hour talking about weaving together the languages of Arabs, Jews and Christians, but by the end it seems you've gone beyond languages...?

OG: First, there's one obvious model for *Ayre*, and for the last song in particular: Gil Evans with Miles Davis in *Sketches of Spain*, and specifically the track "Solea". It's a kind of cousin to Ravel's *Bolero*: a structure that repeats and repeats, but somebody is climbing and climbing and climbing towards ecstasy over this repetitive process. I cannot climb to Arab or Christian music, but I know my share of Jewish music – when you are singing these spiritual songs, any songs – the deepest moments come when the words disappear and a singer just says "Oh" or "Oh yeah" or whatever. After 40 minutes of music I want just those words. It's like when you launch a rocket, and the launcher falls, and then the energy should just be the music. That's the reason why there are no words. I wanted Dawn's pure voice to be free of words after her words which were so significant.

The other thing is that this piece is also like the last variation of the *Goldberg Variations*. It consists of fragments – in this case of different Sephardic songs – put together over this groove that is fantastic but gave us so much trouble, because it's in 9/8, not in 8/8. You learn to feel that extra little beat. It's like a belly dance: it takes a long time to click, but once it does it's phenomenal and you can go on forever.

General

31. In some of the works contributed by Santaolalla the ronrocco is played ...

OG: The ronrocco is a magical Argentinian instrument. I don't know if you've heard the charango [a small Andean guitar], which was made popular by the *Misa Criolla*, a famous piece of the 60s. The ronrocco is just a charango an octave lower, and like the charango it has something very human and sweet. It can break your heart but at the same time has this Pinocchio quality. It's that sensibility.

32. It seems unusual the classical world to write a piece and, at a certain point, let someone else contribute the music. How did that come about?

OG: First of all, I love Gustavo's music. Second, *Ayre* was premiered on the 31st of March and I only started writing it on the 1st. Gustavo lives in L.A. and he was coming to play [in New York]. I said to him: In case I'm expecting too much and can't write it all, I would play two of your songs. So there's a practical reason and the artistic one. His two songs function like interludes, placed as number four and number nine, which is almost symmetrical. They're a little oasis in the journey. Number four coming after the Sardinian song is really like a balm.

33. The piece rocks. Where does this come from?

OG: A lot of credit should go to the producer of the record, Gustavo Santaolalla, who comes from a completely different world, the world of rock. He mixes every instrument and Dawn's voice, which is completely taboo, even in so-called "cool" classical music. Since he never did a classical album before, he comes with what he knows. He's a sort of Argentinian Elvis Costello and has this incredible library in his head of any popular song that was created between 1955 and today. He comes with that baggage and I come with this and Dawn comes with that. The pot gets full of different soups, and that's good.

The Ensemble

34. What's the ensemble that performs your piece?

OG: We have a flute, clarinet, horn, guitar, that also doubles on ronroco, harp, the laptop, an accordion with pedals, percussion, viola, cello and a double bass. It's a companion piece to the Berio, so I wanted to incorporate Berio's ensemble – for budget reasons, too. But then there's the horn. Eric Rask played the premiere, but in the recording it's Jamie Sommerville. I don't think that I'd have thought of horn if I didn't know these amazing players. It's the same with the accordion and Michael Word-Birdman. It's a sentimental kind of thing.

35. Duke Ellington used to say: "I don't write for a trumpet, I write for a trumpeter".

OG: I know exactly what he meant. That's the beauty of music. Coming back to your question about Cathy Berberian: I think that every great and small composer writes for specific people. For instance, I was surprised that when I wrote *Isaac the Blind* for klezmer clarinet, people said "Oh that's so special because you wrote it for *that* guy". Or now, *Ayre* for Dawn. Mozart used to call his Clarinet Quintet the "Stadler" Quintet, because he wrote it for this guy called Stadler who could do wonders with the clarinet. Now it's a piece for every clarinetist on the planet. What Cathy Berberian did was to reinvent the concept of classical singer. And that's also what Dawn is doing today. In the next generation there will be ten or twenty singers who do it; that's how life is. It was the same with the bassoon solo in the *Rite of Spring*. I'm sure that Stravinsky knew one great bassoonist who could play it, but now it's taught at every conservatory.

36. Are you creating a 21st-century chamber ensemble?

OG: I would love to say yes, but I don't think so. I just like to say: let's do this, let's do that. I'm not being very theoretical when I think: let's have this guy play. I also like the chemical mixture of putting this particular horn player next to the accordionist and they don't know each other. I know that something volatile will happen.

37. There's a little joke in the name of the band that performs. What is it?

OG: Maybe it's a little funny, but I think there are a lot of meanings. First of all, there's the allusion to the famous Buñuel and Dalí movie, *The Andalusian Dog*. Second, Andalusia is the point of departure of *Ayre*, where these three cultures co-existed, Arab, Christian and Jewish. And dogs, because I like to think if you see that piece performed live, they look like dogs – in a good sense. In America you don't

have what you do growing up in Argentina, where you see in the streets dogs going in packs. They just go out there and do their thing.

DU: There is something gypsy too about the image for me, the travelling and not having a home ...

OG: Think of peddlers. You also see it in *Amores Perros*, the great movie by Iñárritu. The idea in this piece is you have the dog that plays the klezmer clarinet, the dog that plays the Argentinian ronrocco, the dog that plays the laptop. I could see the parallel with those street dogs in La Plata, Argentina, where the different breeds are all hybrids...

DU: It's a poodle at the harp!

38. Dawn, how did you manage to learn the works so quickly?

DU: I was sort of living it once I got the music. It was a unique experience, because I had to be inside of it so quickly and so intensely. My family, I think, would tell you that it was as though I was on the road even though I was home preparing it. It was so worth waiting for.

General

39. The theatricality in this piece strikes me. You've done a lot of music theatre. Previously you said you felt liberated when you have to do something on stage. Is it the same for you in the studio?

DU: Sure, and in some ways there's even greater freedom in the studio – certainly through repetition alone, but also a physical freedom. Not being at all distracted by how I look to the audience, and so really feeling like I can be in my own physical world. And there is a lot of physicality to this piece. I hope I can bring more and more of that freedom to the stage.

40. Dawn, after learning and recording this piece in such a short time, what do you take away from it?

DU: I don't think I'm capable of deciphering all of the things at that point. It's still much too close. Sitting and talking about the piece reminds me of how incredibly important that time was to me and how life seem to be moving so quickly. The experience was so new to me, the sounds were so new, the musical world was so new. I'm sure that it will take me a while to figure out how it's affected everything else.

41. It's a remarkable achievement for one month.

OG: Most of the melodies are not mine; I think that composition is to put things together. So I got this melody which I harmonize, re-orchestrate, change, cut, play with. I put myself in a difficult situation: to have friends like Dawn, Gustavo and everybody else in the ensemble who trusted me and waited for a piece. If there is anybody you don't want to disappoint, it's your friends.