Three Songs
from
Tender Buttons
1983; 1989
Charles Shere
I met the writing of Gertrude Stein through the old RCA Victor recording of Virgil Thomson’s opera to her libretto, *Four Saints in Three Acts*. That would have been in 1955 or thereabouts. What charmed me immediately was the innocence, clarity, fantasy, and good humor of both the words and the music. There were other examples of this sort of brittle, intelligent Modernism, notably William Walton’s setting of Edith Sitwell’s poems in *Façade*, but it was Stein who remained a constant favorite over the years.

It was not until 1972, though, that I thought to make my own musical settings of her work. This was *Dates*, a sort of chamber cantata for soprano, clarinetist, violinist, and percussionist. (The instrumentation includes clarinets in Eb and A, bass clarinet, violin and viola, marimba and vibraphone.)

Then in 1975 I turned to *Tender Buttons*, her collection of “cubist” prose poems, most of them short, and quickly set three of them: “Peeled Pencil. Choke,” “Dirt and Not Copper,” and “The White Hunter.” John Duykers sang the last two in one of those Bicentennial concerts nodding to American composers, but he will not remember this.

The wonderful soprano Judy Hubbell asked, I think, for some songs, and I thought of working my way slowly over the years through the whole of *Tender Buttons*, setting the texts to different performing forces. “A Carafe” was the first to appear, in 1983, and “Suppose an Eyes” and “Rhubarb” followed in 1989 for a recital she gave in San Francisco. It seemed logical to issue them as the present set.

In 1987 I got more serious about this and decided to begin setting the plays. I was learning to compose at the computer, and turned to *Ladies Voices* for inspiration, setting the play on three sopranos, woodwind quintet, and trap set. Two years later I made a complementary setting of *I Like It to Be a Play*, for three male voices (tenor, baritone, bass) and string quartet. (I would like one day to have the opportunity to set a finale to the trilogy, *What Happened a Play*, for the combined forces of the first two chamber operas.)

In 1997 I returned to *Tender Buttons* for a concert in Santa Cruz, setting “It Was Black, Black Took” and “Red Roses” for mezzo-soprano, violin, bass clarinet, and piano, and adding to them a setting of a fugitive Stein text, “You Can Only Say What You Know,” which I know only from Lew Welch’s quotation of it in his book *How I Read Stein*.


These *Three Songs from Tender Buttons* are meant to be light-hearted, though I do think “A Carafe” has rather a winsome quality.

—Charles Shere
Healdsburg, September 2016
ERRATUM

As originally set, there is an error in the quotation of Gertrude Stein’s poem *Suppose An Eyes*. It can be rectified by substituting the following for measure 13 on page six of the present edition.

Three Songs from Tender Buttons

**Rhubarb**

Text by Gertrude Stein
from *Tender Buttons*

Music by Charles Shere

*Brightly, \( \frac{1}{4} = 120 \)*

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<td>Rhu-barb is su-san not su-san not seat in bunch toys not</td>
<td>detached but on the string</td>
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Wild and laugh-a-ble not in little places not

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in neglect and vegetable not in coal age

sales of leather and such beautiful beautiful,
Three Songs from Tender Buttons

A Carafe, That Is a Blind Glass

Gertrude Stein

Gently, $q = 69$

Gertrude Stein

Charles Shere

Soprano

A kind in glass and a cousin. A spectacle and nothing

Violin

always under the voice

Soprano

strange. A single hurt color and an ar-

Violin

bring out

as before

pp pizz.
range—ment in a system to point ing.

All this and nor di na ry not un or dered in not re sembl ing

The dif fer ence is spread ing.

Sup pose a col lapse in rubbed purr,

Slightly slower, $q = 106$

Ritardando... Slightly slower, $q = 106$

1983
Suppose an Eyes

Text by Gertrude Stein
from Tender Buttons

Music by Charles Shere

Three Songs from Tender Buttons

Suppose an Eyes

_Brightly and a little ironically, in the style of a march_

_Suppose it is within a gate which open is open_

_Brightly and a little ironically, in the style of a march_

At the hour of closing summer, that is to say it_

_He can read, he is a size to show shutting up twenty-four_

Go red, go red, laugh white

31

Soprano

Violin

Piano

Music by Charles Shere

from Tender Buttons

Brightly and a little ironically, in the style of a march

Suppose it is within a gate which open is open

Brightly and a little ironically, in the style of a march

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