

CHRISTOPHER CERRONE *I Will Learn to Love a Person*

Much has been written about Generation Y, or “Millennials,” as they are more commonly known. This generation is tech-savvy, coming of age at the start of the internet boom, but also remembers a time when smartphones, Spotify, and AI were all but a fantasy. They are resilient but somewhat jaded, having lived through some of the most devastating crises in modern history—9/11, the Iraq War, the Great Recession, and, more recently, the COVID-19 pandemic. This perfect storm of circumstances led Annie Lowrey of *The Atlantic* to dub them the “New Lost Generation” in April 2020.

However, the Millennial condition is a subject not often addressed in contemporary classical music, an oversight that Brooklyn-based composer Christopher Cerrone sought to rectify. After completing his opera *Invisible Cities* (a finalist for the 2014 Pulitzer Prize), Cerrone wanted to compose a vocal work that resonated more directly with an “overeducated 29-year-old Millennial,” as he described himself. He soon stumbled across the poetry of Tao Lin, an American author whose style is rooted in the fragmentary language of the Internet and social media. These writings instantly hit a nerve. “What struck me was a kind of immediacy,” Cerrone recalled, “They were so direct and self-doubting and kind of funny. The thing I look for in words is space for music, and it struck me as the perfect text that, if sung, would be amplified.” The resulting song cycle, *I will learn to love a person*—scored for soprano, clarinet, piano, and percussion—was completed in 2013 and sets five of Lin’s poems, which probe the emotional nuances of Millennial relationships in an hyperconnected world. By doing so, Cerrone hopes that the work “reflects the strange and beautiful experience of growing up at the turn of the century” in all its messy, contradictive, and wondrous glory.

The first song (“The sky was green that night”) opens with a chilled hush. Soft wanderings in the piano and vibraphone provide a gentle cushion for the soprano’s entrance, whose chantlike musings soon blossom into a doubtful reverie. Twinges of bitterness are exacerbated by the clarinet on the words “that hurts,” a musical idea that will return later. After the soprano shrugs off her lover’s disinterestedness, without break, the ensemble gathers momentum and launches headlong into the next song (“Eleven page poem, part iii”). Though bright and ecstatic on the surface, lines such as “i feel terribly lonely and insane” suggest that everything is not alright. The song concludes with a climactic assurance that the protagonist will “be right back” (or “brb” in text message lingo). But, a break between the final two words raises a moment of doubt. Is our protagonist indeed planning to “be right back”? It’s up to the listener to decide, as the cycle impassively moves on.

The following movement (“I will learn to love a person...”) is of similar character to the opening, albeit calmer and a bit more lyrical. After a callback to the sharp pangs of “that hurts,” the voice catapults up to a high B-flat—its highest note in the work—on the words “we must try harder,” a declaration that may be made in vain. The hyperkinetic energy of the second song returns in “When I leave this place,” which bubbles happily along before tumbling into another broken, ambiguous “be right back.” The final song (“Are you ok?”) is perhaps the bluntest of the cycle, ruminating on the theme of a broken relationship. It starts off hopeful but takes a darker turn as the clarinet and vibraphone introduce hints of dissonance. The most striking moment occurs when the soprano recalls a dream where she “went into your room and crawled

under your sheets from the end of your bed.” Written in the style of “a strange waltz” — as the composer calls it in the score — this text is repeated three times, imbuing the words with an obsessive, almost sinister quality. The mood soon brightens as the protagonist wishes her lover (or former lover) “happy birthday,” and wistfully concludes that “i miss walking with you at night.” Is there any hope of reconciliation? A brief coda — which ricochets between the piano and vibraphone — seems to suggest that there is not. For now, at least, the protagonist will have to face the bright and terrifying unknown, continuing to “learn to love a person” until the right someone comes along.

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