

# Airs for Mother

for mezzo-soprano and string quartet

Duration: 16 minutes

"Airs for Mother" is a prayer; a deep meditation on my mother's passage into the afterlife. It offers brief snippets of some of our most indelible moments together, all the way from my early childhood until her later and more challenging years. It also marks my second ever foray into writing lyrics, and the very first in the English language—a decision that came naturally, for a subject so personal could not be tackled by anyone but myself.

Written in a direct yet poetic language, the texts offer us a glimpse into four moments in time, each with its own distinct mood: the feeling of safety that only a mother's arms can give a young child, the joy and excitement of a large family celebration, the hardships of loss and illness, and the inescapable journey from the physical to the spiritual world. The music is sincere and unpretentious, at times evoking the naïveté and simplicity of a child, but always with an aura of sophistication in its vocal and instrumental treatment. The voice reigns supreme, but the string quartet displays a wide arsenal of colors and textures, be it by supporting the vocal line, or by offering a contre-chant of comparable importance.

In joy and sorrow, health and illness, my mother was an unfailing source of love for everyone in the family. Her voice made me company every single day, and our love endured and thrived—our physical distance notwithstanding. "Every Second" tells of her unconditional love and keenness on preserving the innocence of our early childhood by shielding us from the outside world. Always attentive and watchful, she cared for us more than she did for herself, putting our needs and ambitions before hers. "Your Gaze" explores seemingly unimportant moments: the sound of my mother's heels against the wooden floor, her jewelry ringing, her perfume leaving an intoxicating trace behind her, the excitement of a family gathering and the aromas emanating from the kitchen in preparation for a bountiful meal—all this centered around her smile, because that is the one thing we could always count on: her disarmingly charming smile. Time, however, has a way of wilting the most beautiful flowers, and as mom aged, some of that joy would inevitably flicker. It all started when us, her children, left the house for distant countries, but it was our father's passing that truly carved a wound in her heart from which she would never recover. The years that followed and her progressive illness made it increasingly harder for us to create new memories. The mother we knew, with her poise and elegance, was fading away, clinging obsessively to distant memories from her youth. Her mind, once as lush as a tropical forest, was now "Barren" like a desert landscape. After finally shedding her physical envelope, "It is Time" invites her to embody her immortal self once again, and to continue pursuing ever greater heights. Her life was a source of joy for many, and her love and care for us will never be forgotten. May this song cycle be a celebration, not only of her life, but of motherhood at large.

I owe the very existence of this piece to my dear friend, star Mezzo-Soprano J'Nai Bridges, so I am doubly grateful to her for having allowed me to dedicate it to my mother, María Elena. This song cycle is scheduled to be premiered on December 1<sup>st</sup>, 2022 by J'Nai and the fabulous Catalyst Quartet, at New York's Kaufmann Concert Hall presented by 92NY Center for Culture & Arts.

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**I. Every Second**

Remember that day  
when I sneaked out of the cradle  
and you held me in your arms  
and returned me with love?

Or the day when I thought  
I could fly off the window,  
so you'd lure me back calmly  
with a beautiful song?

Life was not all you gave me.  
That was just the beginning  
of a wondrous journey.

Every year, every day, every second,  
every smile, every heartbreak,  
be it triumph or loss  
you'd reward with embrace.

You were daughter by fate  
but were mother by choice.  
You would seal us from pain,  
have us live in a world  
full of wonder, hope, joy!

Just once gone we would learn  
and admire your strength,  
for those blows that life dealt you  
you kept all to yourself.

**II. Your Gaze**

Your eyes, ever playful.  
Your laughter, your smile.  
How warmly you embrace me.  
How soothing your voice.

The morning gone quickly,  
the flowers still fresh.  
Our kitchen bustling,  
engulfing our dwellings  
in flavors and scents.

The clock is now ticking.  
Your heels clicking sharply.  
The guests are arriving.  
Your smell of perfume.

What pleasures await us?  
What fables in store for us?  
The champagne keeps pouring  
as dusk casts a spell.

It's now bedtime for us, little ones,  
but the chatter continues as sleep settles in.  
How comforting to know, though,  
that darkness, ephemeral,  
will give way to morning  
and once again  
to your gaze.

### **III. Barren**

Are you still there, mother?  
Where's your poise and grace?  
Time, so cruel has traded  
beauty and youth for pain.

Not content it's stolen  
days and nights on end.  
Every book that life wrote  
now lies blank or bare.

I refuse to accept  
all forever is lost.  
I know somewhere, someplace radiant  
thrives with each remembrance,  
teems with myths and truths!

But worry not, dear mother  
for all your stories and mem'ries  
are safe here, with me.  
Even though night has settled,  
and compels you to rest,  
every tale, every detail  
is safe here, with me.  
Every sob, every whisper...  
lies in here, within.

#### **IV. It is Time**

Mother, mother  
you've been sleeping.  
Look at father,  
he's not weeping  
and neither am I,  
and neither is sister,  
for we all know well  
that great joys await you.

Strip yourself of your earthly shell.  
Shed your sorrows, shed your fears.  
Look ahead: a host of spirits  
eager to embrace you with welcoming arms!

The path is lucent,  
the burden lighter.  
Your diaphanous heart beats many times faster.  
Ascend, oh mother, reach higher and higher!  
The light of our cities, a faint glow below.

And once high above in the heavens  
from time altogether removed,  
your life will appear so fleeting,  
your love now much grander and purer.  
Your worries once truly insurmountable  
then nothing but ash in the wind.

Go on now mother, go on shine forth.  
Open your arms, surrender.  
Cross that glaring portal!  
Be your mighty self again!

Your time has now come to remember  
much more than you once thought conceivable.  
A time before any beginning.  
A past when there only was present.

Open your eyes, mother dear!  
See and feel every cell gleaming.  
Put aside every known question.  
Shelve all your possible answers.  
Knowledge will fill you in an instant,  
and when it does, you will know  
Love is the one thing that matters.  
Nothing, not ever, came close.  
Go on, go on, mother...