

SONGS OF DOMINICK ARGENTO AND THEIR USE FOR THE TEACHING OF VOICE AT FACULTIES OF EDUCATION

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Abstract

The study will aim to characterize the songwriting of Dominick Argento (1927–2019), a leading American composer and Pulitzer Prize winner, and to outline the possibilities of its application in the education of solo singers in faculties of education. Argento's songwriting is rich (he composed cycles for every voice except bass) but not well known and rarely performed in Europe. It may be due to the difficulty of some cycles and the fact that not all sheet music is readily available. Part of the study presents the musical compositions of Dominick Argento with a focus on songwriting, the characteristics of textual aspects of songs, and the composer's approach to the musical treatment of song cycles. The second part of the study deals with using Dominick Argento's songwriting in teaching voice at faculties of education. This section includes a short musical and interpretative analysis of selected songs and suggests specific compositions for voice study. The topic's treatment benefits Central European vocal teachers and the professional public.

Keywords

Dominick Argento – vocal creation – art song – song cycle – solo singing – tertiary grade of education

Introduction

*“I think that music began as an emotional language.
For me, all music begins where speech stops.”
(Dominick Argento)¹*

Dominick Argento's music is often described by various adjectives – neo-romantic, lyrical, conservative, eclectic, and conventional because he resisted avant-garde influences. By focusing on human emotion and experience and his preference for vocal music, his work is often compared to that of Benjamin Britten (1913–1976).² In his songs, especially in the manner of phrasing, his melodic gift brings him closer to the American tradition and the neo-romantic Samuel Barber (1910–1981) and Ned Rorem (1923–2022).³ He freely combines

¹ Boosey & Hawkes A Concord Company (2023, January 2). *Dominick Argento. Composer Index. Snapshot*. Retrieved January 14, 2023, from https://www.boosey.com/pages/cr/composer/composer_main?composerid=2691&ttype=SNAPSHOT.

² Feldman, M. A. (2005, January 30). *Dominick Argento: Minnesota Romantic*. Retrieved January 14, 2023, from http://music.minnesota.publicradio.org/features/0210_argento/index.shtml.

³ Kimball, C. (2006). *Song: A Guide to Art Song Style and Literature*. Hal Leonard Corporation, p. 60.

tonality and atonality, uses repetitive melodic structures, surprising chord progressions, persiflage, musical quotations, or various musical ciphers, "...resisting elements of chance, minimalism, and the influences of popular music (especially rock)."⁴ He works creatively with lyrics, composing attractive, melodic music with emotional impact and a dramatic arc. He is aided by a thorough knowledge of the human voice and its interpretive possibilities, a refined sense of language, a deep understanding of how human emotions translate into musical expression, and a perfect command of the composer's craft – harmony, counterpoint, orchestration, and form. Music critic Heidi Waleson described Argento's work as "richly melodic... [his] pieces are built with wit and passion, and always with the dramatic shape and color that make them theater. They speak to the heart."⁵

The attributes mentioned above make Argento's songwriting also interesting for vocal pedagogy. Cycles from his younger years are frequent and almost required repertoire in American music schools because they are vocally composed, vocally accessible, artistically valuable, and, even with the benefit of hindsight, fresh. They offer a performance experience of 20th-century music from a different tradition for European singers.

Compositions of Dominik Argento, with a Focus on Songwriting

Dominick Argento⁶ worked at the Department of Music at the University of Minnesota for his entire professional life (40 years), specializing in composition and opera. Besides teaching, he focused as a composer on opera and stage works (close association with directors of the Minnesota Theatre Company Sir Tyrone Guthrie and Douglas Campbell led to his composing incidental music for several productions),⁷ song cycles,⁸ and vocal-instrumental compositions.⁹

⁴ Feldman, 2005.

⁵ Source Song Festival (2019, February 1). *Dominick Argento*. Retrieved January 15, 2023, from <https://www.sourcesongfestival.org/dominick-argento>.

⁶ Dominick Argento was born in York, Pennsylvania, on October 27, 1927. He studied music at the Peabody Conservatory (N. Nabokov, H. Cowell, and H. Weisgal). After winning a Fulbright scholarship (1951), he further honed his compositional skills at the Cherubini Conservatory under L. Dallapiccola (Argento, D. (2004). *Catalogue Raisonné as Memoir: A Composer's Life*. University of Minnesota Press). In 1957 Argento completed his doctoral studies at the Eastman School of Music (A. Hovhaness, H. Hanson, and B. Rogers) and in 1958 he joined the Department of Music at the University of Minnesota. In 1997 his alma mater awarded him the title of professor emeritus (Feldman, 2005). The composer died in Minneapolis, Minnesota, on February 20, 2019, at the age of 91 (Tommasini, A. (2019, February 25). *Dominick Argento, 'Traditionalist' Composer of Operas, Dies at 91*. The New York Times. Retrieved January 14, 2023, from <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/02/25/obituaries/dominick-argento-dead.html>).

⁷ Argento's frequently performed operas include *Shoemaker's Holiday* – 1967, *Postcard from Morocco* – 1971, *The Voyage of Edgar Allan Poe* – 1976, *Miss Havisham's Fire* – 1979, rev. 1995, and *The Dream of Valentino* – 1993 (Feldman, 2005).

⁸ Argento composed 12 song cycles, including compositions for all voice types except bass and children's voices. The song cycles are as follows: *Songs about Spring* (1954), a cycle of five songs for soprano and piano/soprano and orchestra; *Six Elizabethan Songs* (1957–1958), a cycle of six songs for high voice and piano/high voice and baroque ensemble; *Letters from Composers* (1968), a cycle of seven songs for high voice (tenor) and guitar; *To Be Sung upon the Water* (1973), a cycle of eight songs for high voice (tenor), clarinet/bass clarinet and piano; *From the Diary of the Virginia Woolf* (1974), a cycle of eight songs for mezzo-soprano and piano; *The André Expedition* (1982), a cycle of thirteen songs for baritone and piano; *Casa Guidi* (1983), a cycle of five songs for mezzo-soprano and orchestra/mezzo-soprano and piano; *A Few Words about Chekhov* (1996), a duo cycle of seven songs for mezzo-soprano, baritone and piano; *Miss Manners on Music* (1998), a cycle of seven songs for mezzo-soprano and piano; *Three Sonnets of Petrarch* (2007), three songs for baritone and piano; *Three Meditations* (2008), three songs for solo soprano and *Cabaret Songs* (2011), five songs for mezzo-soprano and piano (The Hampsong Foundation (2023, January 2). *Dominick Argento*. Song of America. Retrieved March 14, 2023, from <https://songofamerica.net/composer/argento-dominick/>).

⁹ Argento's vocal-instrumental compositions include, for example, the oratorio *Jonah and the Whale* (1973), *Te Deum* (1987), and the choral work *Evensong: Of Love and Angels* (2007).



Composer Dominick Argento in 2001¹⁰

He also composed several choral pieces,¹¹ which were commissioned by regional, university, or other renowned ensembles and had an exciting place in his vocal works. Argento's symphonic works¹² have also been performed by many of America's leading orchestras, including the New York Philharmonic and others.¹³

In addition to the Pulitzer Prize for Music for his song cycle *From the Diary of Virginia Woolf* (1975), the composer has received many other honors and awards. He has also been nominated for multiple Grammy Awards, winning the Classical Contemporary Composition category award in 1991 for *Te Deum* and in 2004 for the *Casa Guidi* cycle.¹⁴

Dominick Argento considers the voice the original instrument and is fascinated by its flexibility, sensitivity, and vulnerability, as well as by creating for it. He claims, "The singer's intelligence, character, technique, and instrument are so intimately integrated that they create a 'persona' readily identifiable."¹⁵

In his essay, *The Matter of Text*, Argento quotes Gustave Flaubert's idea that "one is certainly not free to write on any subject" and considers artistic freedom in this context to be an illusion. He claims that we do not choose the topic, but it chooses us. He further states that he was always proud of the variety and imagination of the literary subjects in his work until he realized that the individual works are diverse only in the way processing the theme of self-knowledge – comic, farcical, or serious, which pervades and unifies not only his operatic but also his composition of songs.¹⁶

¹⁰ Source Song Festival, 2019.

¹¹ Well-known are, for example, the choral cycles *I Hate and I Love* (1982) and *The Seasons* (2014).

¹² Argento's instrumental compositions include the orchestral variations *Masks of the Night* – 1965; the orchestral songs *Praise of Music* – 1977 (Argento, 2004) and many others.

¹³ Argento, 2004.

¹⁴ Feldman, 2005.

¹⁵ Argento, D. (1977). The Composer and the Singer. *The NATS Bulletin: The Official Magazine of the National Association of Teachers of Singing.*, No. 4 (33), 18–24.

¹⁶ Argento, D. (1988). The Matter of Text. *The NATS Journal*, No. 4 (44), 8–9.

In one of the interviews, the composer states that he loves language and words. Setting a literary text to music is natural for him, and if he had not become a composer, he would undoubtedly have been a writer.¹⁷ His ability to use literary language for the benefit of expressing musical intent is genuinely extraordinary, closely related to the natural shaping of the text – to its prosody, formal side, and emotional and semantic peaks. The composer explains his inclination toward a prose text by the rhythmic freedom of the sentence and the possibility to slow down and emphasize a word. At the same time, he considers composing in English challenging, especially if it is a poetic text with a bound rhythm, from which “... you cannot deviate, you cannot impose your own feeling on it...”¹⁸

Several of Argento’s song cycles are remarkable for their choice of unusual prose, including letters, and diary entries, which in the first place did not offer apparent possibilities for musical settings, but suited him for their intimacy of the prose, allowing insight into the mind of the author, not always outwardly presented in his published works (V. Woolf, E. B. Browning, A. P. Chekhov, letters of composers, researchers, etc.).

In the essay, *The Composer and the Singer*, Argento compare the intimacy of the letter and the diary entry to the intimacy of the song, which he considers the quintessence of the composer’s personality, his purest statement, “the most personal being, unadorned, unencumbered, stripped of pose, spontaneous, distilled which (...) gives us the essence of his musical language – pure and simple.”¹⁹

Argento often chose the text based on who would sing his work and adapted the musical arrangement to the performer’s character.²⁰ Almost all his cycles were commissioned, mainly at the initiative of specific singers: *Songs About Spring* for Carolyn Bailey,²¹ *Six Elizabethan Songs* for Nicholas DiVirgilio. The most important of them – *From the Diary of Virginia Woolf*, *The Andréé Expedition*, and *A Few Words about Chekhov* – were commissioned by the Schubert Club for Janet Baker and Håkan Hagegård, while the impetus for the *Casa Guidi* cycle was a commission for the mezzo-soprano Frederika von Stade.²²

The diversity of the composer’s approach to the musical processing of literary works within the cycles is also reflected, for example, in the selection of less common groupings – high voice and baroque ensemble; high voice and guitar; high voice, clarinet/bass clarinet and piano; duet cycle for mezzo-soprano, baritone and piano or songs for solo soprano. Like Strauss and Mahler, many of Argento’s songs exist in both piano and orchestral versions. In compositions from the 1970s onwards, the composer usually uses prominent prologues and epilogues that reflect a dramatic arc reminiscent of a monodrama or chamber opera. After 1974, his work is dominated by compositions for more colorful voices – mezzo-soprano and baritone.

¹⁷ Douma, J. (2007). Building a Well-made House: An Interview with Dominick Argento. *Choral Journal: The Official Publication of the American Choral Directors Association.*, No. 12 (47), 28–35.

¹⁸ Douma, 2007, p. 32.

¹⁹ Argento, 1977, p. 20.

²⁰ Douma, 2007, p. 33.

²¹ Note: Carolyn Bailey, the composer’s wife, premiered all the vocal works he composed for soprano and was an invaluable adviser to him (Argento, 2004, p. 5). In collaboration with the National Opera Association, Argento founded the Carolyn Bailey Argento Vocal Competition in honor of his wife, in which young singers can compete annually to win a generous scholarship that will cover their studies at the master’s or postgraduate level at most U.S. art schools (National Opera Association (2023, January 2). *Carolyn Bailey Argento Vocal Competition*. Retrieved January 17, 2023, from <https://www.noa.org/vocal.html>).

²² Argento, 2004.

To reconcile the musical and textual components, Argento sometimes uses complex rhythms and frequent changes of measure and meter, freely combining places with clear tonality and atonal sections, using repetitive melodic structures and various ciphers. For example, in the cycle *The Andree Expedition*, he deliberately illustrates the expedition's journey by choosing different keys. The prologue and epilogue are in A major (A as Andree), songs in the Part I are in major keys and follow a circle of fifths. In Part II, we also find songs in minor "...[they] are a kind of sign that they [the expedition] are leaving, ascending, wandering [...] their bodies are returned to Sweden after the tragedy, so we end up where we started."²³ He also often works with musical quotations and allusions to European musical history. For example, in *Letters from Composers* cycle, he uses his musical language to imitate the musical styles of his favorite composers, from Bach to Debussy (Bach's case uses contrapuntal work with voices and augmentation; in Chopin's case uses a hint of a nocturne, in Mozart's case use of Alberti's bass, in Schubert's case quoted of a phrase from *Gretchen am Spinnrade's* song *Meine Ruh ist hin, Mein Herz ist schwer*,²⁴ and by the oscillations between Major and Minor, and so on); in *To Be Sung upon the Water*, he works with allusions to Schubert (to the song *Auf dem Wasser zu singen*, with the theme and motifs of wandering, the use of contrasting moods in the order of the songs, the illustration of nature in the way of instrumentation, etc.); in *From the Diary of Virginia Woolf*, we find in the fourth song anticipated liturgical chants (Requiem aeternam), in the fifth a quotation from Tosca; in *Miss Manners on Music*, e.g., in the song *Manners at the Opera*²⁵ we find hints of recitative and arioso movements and allusions to Italian opera.

Argento's musical language is lyrical, richly melodic, with broadly arching and cantilena-like phrases, and he composes vocally despite the more complex intervallic progressions. He also exploits the various expressive possibilities of the voice in terms of dynamics and tone production; for example, in the cycle *From the Diary of Virginia Woolf*, he enhances the intimacy of the text and emphasizes the experience of the main character with an often lower, almost speaking position of the voice, muted dynamics, repetitiveness, and almost a cappella singing. In the song *War*, these means of expression also underline Woolf's fear when she finds herself in a borderline life-and-death situation.²⁶

The composer makes considerable demands on the performer, often prescribing many interpretative requirements, but through these passages, he accompanies the singer, and the song thus takes on concrete contours. The vocal and piano or other instrumental or orchestral components are entirely autonomous. The song cycles from the period after 1974 are already demanding, requiring technically and interpretively mature performers who can translate a wide range of emotions and experiences of a person in a difficult life situation.

²³ Argento, 2004, p. 20.

²⁴ The quotation mentioned can be found in the video available online from the 9th minute 34th second. The cycle was performed by Michael Slattery – tenor, and Jeffrey Van – guitar, at the Source Song Festival of Minnesota on August 8, 2016 ([Source Song Festival of Minnesota. An Argento Celebration]. (2020, July 26). *Letters from Composers by Dominick Argento*. [Video]. Youtube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OgkQbxSHa5c&t=576s>).

²⁵ A live recording of the cycle is available online, performed by Phillis Pancella – mezzo-soprano, and Timothy Hoekman – piano. The mentioned song can be found in the video from the 15th-minute 22nd second ([Emersonsgirl]. (2014, May 27). *Miss Manners on Music by Dominick Argento* [Video]. Youtube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-jC6L3IEf4>).

²⁶ Woolf's London home was destroyed in an air raid (Kimball, 2005, p. 723).

The image shows a musical score for the introduction of the song 'Manners at the Opera'. It consists of three systems of music. The first system is marked 'Allegro (♩ = 84)' and 'pp' (pianissimo). The second system continues the piano accompaniment. The third system features a vocal line starting with the lyrics 'Dear Miss...' and a piano accompaniment. The key signature is two flats (B-flat and E-flat), and the time signature is common time (C).

Example 1: Allusions to Italian opera in the introduction of the song *Manners at the Opera*.²⁷

The image shows a musical score for the song 'War'. It consists of two systems of music. The first system features a vocal line with lyrics 'I have no sur-round- ings... Those fa - mil - iar cir - cum - vo -' and a piano accompaniment. The tempo is marked '(♩ = 108) agitato' and 'lunga' (longa). The second system features a vocal line with lyrics 'lu - tions - those stan - dards - which have for' and a piano accompaniment. The tempo is marked '(♩ = 108) mp' and 'rall.' (rallentando). The key signature is two sharps (F# and C#), and the time signature is common time (C).

Example 2: Song *War*.²⁸

²⁷ Argento, D. (2006b). *Collected Song Cycles. Medium/Low voice* (p. 219). Hal Leonard, Boosey & Hawkes.

²⁸ Argento, 2006b, p. 73. Note: A live recording of the cycle from January 5, 1975, at Orchestral Hall in Minneapolis performed by Dame Janet Baker and Martin Isepp can be heard here - [Hal Leonard Listening Library - Art Song]. (2017, April 4). *From the Diary of Virginia Wolf by Dominick Argento* [Video]. Youtube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VmUgvQJXfbs&t=897s>.

The Use of Dominick Argento's Songwriting in the Teaching of Voice at Faculties of Education

Even though the national singing schools are vastly different, some general requirements become the goal of technical training and interpretation progress. The contemporary singing ideal used in solo concerts and operatic singing expects breath support, covered, mixed, soft, loose, resonant tone with perfect vibrato and capable of dynamic changes.²⁹

Compared to music faculties, the vocal training of future teachers for primary music schools tends towards a different aesthetic of tone (a natural-sounding tone without exaggerated vibrato is desired as the most suitable singing model for the pupil). The differences are also in the difficulty of the repertoire,³⁰ the choice of which must be varied in character and style and lead to the acquisition and deepening of the student's vocal-technical and performing abilities and to a cultivated and artfully valuable vocal expression.

We tried to select songs from Dominick Argento's work that would meet the following requirements:

1. adequate technical and performance demands on a young voice in training,
2. possibilities of qualitative development of the voice (color, range, mobility),
3. mastery of English diction,
4. adequate song length,
5. not too demanding piano accompaniment.

The choice of repertoire is, of course, in the hands of the teacher. It is his/her decision whether, for a particular student, he/she prefers songs that require a more advanced level of singing technique or whether he/she places more demanding requirements on the student in interpretation, and also what language he/she chooses to use. The possibility of reaching for repertoire in English is helped by the fact that the current generation of young people is well-versed in the language, and for many, it sounds very natural.

Argento's compositions often demand some level of technical proficiency and musical sensitivity from the performer, making them a challenge for students of singing. Additionally, his vocal writing often incorporates complex rhythmic and melodic elements that can help students develop their rhythmic precision and melodic control. In terms of teaching, Argento's music can also provide students with valuable opportunities to explore different interpretive approaches. Through careful study and analysis of his scores, students can gain a deeper appreciation for the nuances of musical expression and develop their style as a performer.

Argento's second song cycle, ***Six Elizabethan Songs***, is most often used in the vocal training of young voices. The composer was aware of this fact and saw its popularity among young singers as a tribute: "*Six Elizabethan Songs* – the very first work I composed after my postgraduate studies – has turned out to be my most performed. There are now at least seven recordings (...), several of which are made with a baroque ensemble (which I prefer).

²⁹ Šimová, O. (1991). *Teória hudobnej výchovy: Základy vokálnej interpretácie (Theory of Music Education: Fundamentals of Vocal Performance)*. Univerzita Komenského v Bratislave, p. 17.

³⁰ Žiarna, M. (2015). Inovácia študijného programu Hudobné umenie a spev na Katedre hudby PF KU v Ružomberku (Innovation of the Study Programme Music and Singing at the Department of Music, Faculty of Education, the Catholic University in Ružomberok). *Studia Scientifica Facultatis Paedagogicae Universitas Catholica Ružomberok*, No. 1 (14), 80.

It turns up frequently in recitals and seems to be popular with singing teachers. (...) I was informed that they are required repertoire in Canadian music schools, which is more significant to me than winning a Pulitzer Prize.”³¹

This cycle of six songs set to poetry by Elizabethan poets for high voice and piano was composed in 1957–1958, lasts 19 minutes, and was premiered on April 23, 1958, at the Eastman School of Music in Rochester, New York. It featured Nicholas DiVirgilio, tenor, and David Burge, pianist. Argento also orchestrated a version for a baroque ensemble in 1963. The premiere was in Minneapolis on March 8, 1963, sung by Carolyn Bailey.³²

At the time of the *Six Elizabethan Songs*, Argento was in his early thirties. It is thus the work of a young man, full of energy and lyricism, with rich melody and harmony. The poetic form influenced choice of musical form (based mainly on the bipartition) and the choice of musical devices to illustrate the mood of the songs, combining classical poetry and the compositional techniques of 20th-century music.³³ The song texts are united by the choice of Elizabethan authors, belong to the love, reflective, or nature lyric, and have a different poetic form. The composer sorted texts in the cycle contrastingly, especially in terms of tempo – fast, *Spring*, *Winter*, *Diaphenia*, alternating with slow, moderate, *Sleep*, *Dirge*, and *Hymn*. The vocal and piano lines are equal, and intertwined, the piano accompaniment plays a significant role in creating a poetic mood. Several songs are similar in their dynamic quiet endings (*Spring*, *Sleep*, *Dirge*, *Hymn*).

Although the cycle requires a reasonably capable performer with a light and mobile voice that can meet the composer’s recitative demands, a large voice is not required. The songs’ different emotional positions, and the choice of timeless texts using various expressive devices (which the composer lists precisely in the vocal part – e. g. dynamic shades from *ppp* to *p* refines the further instructions *pp quasi sotto voce*; agogic changes similarly), also develop the singer’s interpretation skills. However, collaboration with a technically proficient pianist is essential. Although he places somewhat higher technical demands on the singers, one can imagine, for example, using a variety of songs in a diploma concert for more mature and mobile lyrical voices. The popularity of the cycle with voice teachers is justified by the technical and artistic demands the cycle places on the performers. The prescribed tempi and length of phrases respect the natural breathing capacity and contribute to the development of cantilena and tone conduction in *legato*, the mobility of the voice, and the elimination of intervallic singing. Chromaticism and intonation leaps develop the singer aurally, and recitative stretches help more convincing expression and precise articulation.

An example of a technically accessible and impressive composition, useful in the vocal training of lyric soprano or tenor voices, can be found in the opening song **Spring**. The text comes from the allegorical pastoral theatrical comedy *Summer’s Last Will and Testament*, written by Thomas Nashe (1567–1601).³⁴ The lyric poem of the character Spring (Vertum) from the above comedy is a nature lyric celebrating the season, new life, and happiness,

³¹ Argento, 2004, pp. 29–30.

³² Ibid., p. 26.

³³ Kimball, 2006, p. 726.

³⁴ Nashe’s lyrics have inspired several composers. In the 20th century, it was heard, for example, in the *Spring Symphony*, Op. 44 by Benjamin Britten (1913–1976), became part of choral compositions and is also set to music in song cycles by Frederick Delius (1862–1934), Ivor Gurney (1890–1937), and Peter Warlock (1894–1930), among others (The LiederNet Archive (2003, September 14). *Spring, the Sweet Spring, is the Year’s...* Retrieved February 11, 2023, from https://www.lieder.net/lieder/get_text.html?TextId=120047).

dominated by liveliness, joy, and descriptiveness of images. The beauty of spring is presented through simple pastoral scenery and figurative means of expression. Each stanza concludes with an onomatopoeic series of words depicting a chorus of birds – a cuckoo, a nightingale, a titmouse, and an owl are heard. In the end, by repeating the first verse, the lyric voice in the exclamation accentuates the sweetness and enthusiasm of spring.

The song is in a rather lively tempo, *Allegretto piacevole* ($\text{♩} = 96$), in F major, 2/4 time, but the key is not defined by foreshadowing at the song's beginning. Its musical form is in three parts, with a tendency towards two parts with abbreviated recapitulation. It enters straightly in *mezzoforte*, without an introduction, as an exclamation, straight through the song's highest note. Despite the dominance of the higher vocal position, it is easy to sing because it falls well within the typical range of a soprano or tenor voice and underlines its mobility. The figurative accompaniment in the piano part in the right hand is articulated *staccato* (*quasi pizzicati*) in sixteenth-note values and evokes lute or guitar playing.

Example 3: The first phrase in the song *Spring*, mm. 1–6.³⁵

The song is energetic, communicates a joyful, vivid image, encourages lyrical expression, undulates with chords, and is more intervallic. The vocal range is $\text{eb}^4\text{--f}^5$, *tessitura*³⁶ ranges from $\text{f}^4\text{--f}^5$. Although not challenging, it requires a performer with a light and mobile voice, able to meet the composer's demands for rapid changes in musical articulation and dynamics, as well as a more technically proficient pianist to enable the singer to sing longer *legato* lines and to provide support in the dynamic construction of phrases. The intervallic nature of the melody and the *staccato* in the piano accompaniment can cause the most acute technical problems, as they are tempting to interrupt the *legato* when phrasing. In moving the melodic line downward, it is essential to maintain the desired activity and tonal balance of the voice. Care should be taken to give distinct diction and intonation and to ensure that minor rhythmic values are sung at a given tempo. The beginnings of phrases with deployment on f^5 on the vocal "i" in words *spring*, *in*, and *street* can be problematic; the prescribed *forte* should not push the singer into forcing the notes in question. Further, some onsets can be problematic in faster tempos. Strict adherence to prescribed musical articulation and dynamics is essential to achieve appropriate expression.

³⁵ Argento, D. (1970). *Six Elizabethan Songs*. Boosey & Hawkes, p. 2.

³⁶ *Tessitura* means the range and position of a sung piece. It determines its difficulty and method for technical mastery (Smutná-Vlková, M. (1961). *Metodika spevu I. (Methodology of Singing, 1st part)*. Supraphon, p. 57).

An example of an interpretively interesting song can also be **Dirge**. Its lyrics come from Shakespeare's comedy *Twelfth Night, or What You Will*, in Act II, Scene 4, in which Cesario (Viola in disguise) and Orsino converse about women not being able to love as intensely as young men. Then Curio and the jester Feste arrive, and at Prince Orsino's request, Feste sings the song *Come Away, Come Away Death* to remind those involved (Orsino and Viola) of their unhappy love.³⁷ The lyrics of the lament belong to the reflexive love lyric, are very intimate, have a somber content, and are based on a lived impression. The lyrical subject is heartbroken because he has been rejected by a "fair cruel maid," wallows in self-pity, and sees death as the only alternative end to his grief. He also addresses death directly, invites it to himself, and asks it for a place of peaceful final rest under the treetops (cypress and yew are symbols of sorrow, death, and eternity). With some satisfaction, he wishes that his body, wrapped in a white shroud and placed in a black coffin, be buried in a secret place without flowers and friends present so that the woman who despised his love may never find a grave in which to mourn him.

Dirge is the fourth song of the cycle. It is in the tempo *Largo e semplice* ($\text{♩} = 60$), in 4/8 time, but again, the key is not defined by foreshadowing at the beginning. The tonal center is obscured, but the song's character is predominantly major; the composer uses *E major*, *G major*, *G minor*, *A major*, and *B major*, and ends in *C major*. The musical form of the song is based on a two-part structure. The introduction evokes a mood of sadness – in the austere and quiet piano accompaniment in *legatissimo*, the composer introduces the musical material of part a (a melodic motif from the right-hand piano part in mm. 1–3) and part b (a harmonic progression based on *E major* in mm. 4–6).



Example 4: The introduction of the song *Dirge*, mm. 1–6.³⁸

The vocal line moves independently of the accompaniment and is composed of short motives and sighs, punctuated by dashes, and moves in a smaller vocal range and smaller intervallic steps. The piano accompaniment is austere – only the right-hand plays in thirds in subdued dynamics at the quarter and eighth note rhythmic values.

³⁷ Stewartry (2010, August 16). *Twelfth Night: Come Away, Come Away, Death*. Retrieved January 20, 2023, from <https://agoldoffish.wordpress.com/2010/08/16/twelfth-night-come-away-come-away-death/>.

³⁸ Argento, 1970, p. 14.

Part b comes in at m. 16 in a livelier tempo (*Poco più mosso*), in *mezzopiano*, the vocal part is recitative-like, moving mainly in *tessitura* e^4 – b^4 . The piano accompaniment also changes – its vertical, chordal character contrasts with the more horizontally composed earlier work.³⁹

The song's end is interesting, with a *stentando* and *melisma* in mm. 41–42 on the word “weep” in the vocal part and a descending melodic line in the piano.⁴⁰

Example 5: The *melisma* and *stentando* at the end of the song *Dirge*, mm. 40–42.⁴¹

The song's vocal range is only e^4 – e^5 , and the *tessitura* of the vocal part is in the range $f\#^4$ – e^5 . However, the song is challenging in communicating boundless sadness and a very intimate atmosphere. The performer can achieve a true expression, especially through his/her calmness and restraint, without pathetic elements. The middle position is more dominant here, so it should be sounded in *piano* and its shades. It is advisable to be aware of the quarter pulsation so that the melody flows in a slow tempo. The b and b^1 parts require more contrasting dynamics and good diction. At the end of the song, it is also necessary to observe the other recitation instructions (*poco crescendo*, *subito pp*, *stentando*).

The cycle *Six Elizabethan Songs* was also published in 2006 in a collection of song cycles for middle and low voice in a transposition a third lower.⁴² This made the songs more accessible regarding the vocal position, but the cycle was primarily written for the high lyric voice, which has different attributes. Songs in a faster tempo (*Spring*, *Winter*, *Diaphenia*) require vocal agility, which is quite a demand for lower, training voices. However, for example, the song *Dirge* has become very accessible to the young baritone due to transposition ($c\#^4$ – $c\#^5$ range in the vocal part).

Among other songs by Dominik Argento, the song ***Spring Is Like a Perhaps Hand*** may be accessible for a technically and interpretively more advanced young lyric soprano at faculties of education from the cycle ***Songs About Spring***. Dedicated to Carolyn Bailey, Argento considered the cycle to be his first opus as a composer, although he did not complete

³⁹ Thomas, E. R. (1988). *A Recital of Art and Dramatic Songs* [Master's thesis, Kansas State University]. <https://archive.org/details/recitalofartdram00thom>.

⁴⁰ Thomas, *ibid.*, p. 41.

⁴¹ Argento, 1970, p. 16.

⁴² Argento, 2006b, p. 229.

it until he was 23. It is characterized by intense lyricism and a romantic mood, featuring atonal sections and places of clear tonality.⁴³ A waltz tempo links the first, third, and fifth songs, and the fourth, meditative, is notable for its canonic treatment of the vocal line in the piano's right hand alone. The vocal range of the songs in the cycle ranges from cb^4 to c^6 , their *tessitura* is high, and they are demanding intonationally and rhythmically in terms of vocal technique and interpretation.

The song *Spring Is Like a Perhaps Hand* is the second in the cycle, it is in the tempo *Larghetto semplice* ($\text{♩} = 72$), in 4/8 time, and the key is not defined by foreshadowing. The tonal center is not completely clear, the harmony oscillates between major and minor characters, modulates, and the harmonic development goes from *A minor* to *F major*. The musical form of the song is based on a two-part form. In the text by E. E. Cummings, spring is poetically likened to a hand that quietly and carefully changes the old for the new, arranging the world while people look on silently. Its mood is very lyrical and intimate. It is supported by a spare piano accompaniment moving in a syncopated rhythm that only stops at the end of each movement, emphasizing in *ppp* to *pppp* the textual point "... and changing everything carefully..." and "...and without breaking anything..."⁴⁴

The image shows a musical score for the song "Spring Is Like a Perhaps Hand". It consists of two systems of music. The first system is marked "Larghetto semplice" and "mp molto espress.". The vocal line is in treble clef, 4/8 time, and the piano accompaniment is in bass clef, 4/8 time. The lyrics are "Spring is like a per -". The second system starts at measure 5 and continues the vocal line with the lyrics "haps hand (wich comes care - ful - ly out of No - where)". The piano accompaniment continues with a syncopated rhythm. The key signature changes from one sharp (F#) to one flat (Bb) in the second system.

Example 6: The descending phrase in the song *Spring Is Like a Perhaps Hand*.⁴⁵

The vocal range of the song is $d\#^4$ – g^5 . The singer technically needs to deal with legato descending phrases progressing from a high vocal position in a slower tempo, with

⁴³ Argento, 2004, p. 5.

⁴⁴ Argento, D. (2006a). *Collected Song Cycles. High Voice*. Hal Leonard, Boosey & Hawkes, p. 6.

⁴⁵ Argento, *ibid.*

frequent measure changes and a more rhythmically demanding vocal line independent of the piano accompaniment.

To avoid losing the musical flow of the phrases, it is advisable to perceive a quarter pulsation for the vocal. It is also necessary to intonationally master surprising and less singable intervallic and chromatic progressions. The performer must also master intelligible diction in dynamics from *ppp* to *mp* and the interpretation of the lyrical aspect of the textual narrative. The cycle *Songs About Spring* transposed a third lower is also part of the middle and low voice collection.

Within the preparation of students at faculties of education, they may also find useful the songs from Argento's latest cycle *Cabaret Songs*, which he composed for middle voice and piano to his texts.

The cycle contains five varied but technically and interpretively accessible songs with simpler harmonic structures and poetic love lyrics. The first of these – **Who Could Have Known?** – is at a moderate tempo (Moderate and lovingly), in the vocal range d^4 – eb^5 , with a lower *tessitura* (d^4 – d^5), and is interpretively oriented towards a chanson-like expression, requiring from the singer a tender, affectionate delivery, the ability to lead phrases with longer rhythmic values in *legato*, and to master intonationally the less usual intervallic leaps. The second song – **You Are a Love Song** – is also in a moderate tempo (Simply and tenderly $\text{♩} = 66$), with a vocal range of b^3 – g^5 , but the vocal line is in a higher *tessitura* (e^4 – g^5). Ascending phrases with second progressions towards a transitional vocal position and a downward deepening of the vocal line in the tail can help the tonal balance of the voice, the phrase



Example 7: The first phrases in the song *You Are a Love Song*.⁴⁶

⁴⁶ Argento, D. (2011). *Cabaret Songs*. Boosey & Hawkes, p. 8.

leading in *legato*, and the aural development of the singer. The song also requires soft, gentle expression and the ability to build phrases dynamically. The shorter singing surface (38 mm.) also makes it accessible.

The other three songs are technically and interpretively more demanding. *The Luckiest Woman* is the fastest in the cycle in terms of tempo (Sprightly, ♩ = 129); the challenge for the performer is mainly its rhythmic aspect (syncopated rhythm, triplets) and intonational precision. The development of the singer's musicality is supported by the humorous lyrics, conceived with exaggeration, about the adverse circumstances that can befall a person at every turn. Using cantilena phrases in Italian and a slow tempo in *Sai Tu Perché?* gives the impression of a moody chanson. The last song has three variations – 5a *You*, 5b *Crazy Lady*, 5c *You, and Crazy Lady*. Because of the variant designations and the closed content of the text, they can also be interpreted separately. The performance of all three songs gives the impression of a cabaret number. Argento states in a note that variant 5b is intended for a singing pianist to enter musically into the applause for the preceding song presenting a declaration of love.⁴⁷ Variant 5c combines the two previous songs; the *duetto* retains its melodic lines and lyrics, and only the piano part is newly arranged and simpler.

Conclusion

Dominick Argento's songs are almost unknown in the Central Europe, yet they represent little unsung and dramaturgically attractive concert or competition repertoire. The study aimed to acquaint the reader with it and to outline possibilities of its use in the vocal training of students at the faculties of education. If one is interested in unusual music of the 20th century and is not looking for an explicitly atonal musical language, a selection from the songwriting of D. Argento can be an exciting alternative allowing for the technical and interpretive growth of young trainee voices.

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⁴⁷ Note: Because he responds with the lyrics "Crazy Lady losin' her mind" ... Variant 5b requires quite a good tenor (vocal range c³-ab⁴, tessitura f³-f⁴).

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