Dear Theo: Letters from Vincent Van Gogh

Jocelyn Hagen

$12.00

tenor, percussion

JH - V009

jocelyn hagen

Dear Theo: Letters from Vincent Van Gogh

for tenor and percussion

jocelynhagen.com
Dear Theo: Letters from Vincent Van Gogh

is scored for tenor and one percussionist, playing marimba (5 octave) and auxiliary percussion (shown below)

Percussion Setup

2 suspended cymbals of different sizes
triangle
3 metal bowls of varying sizes, large to small
large tam tam

Program Notes

As David Walton, Erik Barsness (the commissioners) and I began to discuss the specifics of this commission for tenor and percussion, I was intrigued to learn that a new song reflecting on mental illness and its effects would be a compelling subject for them. I immediately began to research poems by poets who suffered from mental illness ~ there is a long list to choose from, unfortunately. Nothing was inspiring me. I can’t remember how the idea of Vincent Van Gogh came up ~ maybe I had recently seen or pictured one of his paintings. I then discovered these letters written by Van Gogh to his brother Theo while in an asylum in the south of France. There are over 700 letters in all, and they were collected and published by Theo’s wife Johanna in 1914.

The text for this work is comprised of excerpts from these letters, dated October 1888 - July 1890 (the last two years of Van Gogh’s life), when he suffered from frequent mental breakdowns. By reading his letters I discovered that he was very self-critical, full of self-doubt, and even though he is now considered one of the most influential masters of 20th century painting, his art went unrecognized during his lifetime. His brother, Theo, acted as his patron and art dealer, and, as evidenced by the letters, had unwavering faith in his brother’s talent.

Van Gogh tells his brother about the weather, the painting techniques he experiments with, and the effect of his mental illness on his work. I was especially intrigued with his writings on color ~ very particular and often related to his mental state at the time. When composing this song, I wanted to capture all these variances of color, especially in the percussion. This project has also been deeply meaningful to me because of my own experiences with the crippling mental health of a family member. As an artist it was also comforting to read of another artist’s obsessions and struggles surrounding their art. I also feel “the need to work” at any given moment of the day. My composing is such a huge part of my identity as a person, and focusing on my craft centers and stabilizes me, much like it did for Van Gogh.
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I do what I do surrendering myself to nature, without thinking of this or that.

…it’s nature that I feed on. I exaggerate, sometimes I make changes to the subject. Nevertheless, I don’t invent the whole picture - on the contrary I find it ready made in nature but in need of unraveling.

[7 October, 1888]

To work up the heat to melt those golds and flower tones isn’t something that just anyone can do; it takes all the energy and concentration a single individual can muster.

[23 January, 1889]

Since it’s still winter here, please just let me get on with my work; if it’s the work of a madman, that’s just too bad. There’s nothing I can do about it.

[28 January 1889]

I keep thinking about the need to work, and I believe that I’ll regain my full ability for work quite soon. But I often find work so absorbing that I can become very preoccupied and inept bout sorting out the rest of my life.

[mid-May 1889]

You’ll appreciate that this combination of ochre-red, green made dull with gray, and black lines defining the contours — that all this produces something of that feeling of anguish known as “black-red” often experienced by my companions in misfortune. And for that matter, the subject of a mighty tree struck by lightning and the sickly, green-pink smile of the last flower of autumn serve to confirm this idea.

[20 November 1889]
When I was writing this letter I got up to put a few brushstrokes on a canvas I’m working on — in fact, it’s the one with the battered pine trees against a red, orange and yellow sky — yesterday it was very fresh — the tones pure and bright — well, I don’t know what came into my head while I was writing and looking at the canvas, but I told myself that it wasn’t right. So I took a color that appeared on the palette, a dirty, matte white that you get by mixing white, green, and a little carmine. And I plastered this green tone all over the sky, and at a distance it does indeed soften the tones by breaking them up; and yet it would seem as if one was spoiling the canvas and making it dirty. Isn’t this exactly what misfortune and illness do to us and to our health, and are we not better off like this, with the fate that destiny ordains, than serene and in good health by the lights of our own vague ideas and desires of possible happiness? I cannot tell.

[ca. 10 December, 1889]

I fell ill at the time I was doing the almond blossom. If I’d been able to continue working, you can tell from it that I would have done more trees in blossom. Now the blossom on the trees is almost over, I really have no luck.

[30 April, 1890]

And to be honest, it is only through our pictures that we can speak. Dear brother...through me you have your part to play in the actual production of certain canvases, which even in the midst of this disaster retain their calm.

For that’s where we are, and that is all or at least the main thing I have to tell you at this moment of relative crisis. At a moment when things are very fraught among those dealing in pictures by artists both living and dead.

As for my own work, I risk my life for it and my sanity is half shot away because of it — fine — but you’re not one of those dealers in men as far as I know, and you can choose the side you’re on, it seems to me, and act with genuine humanity, but what’s to be done?

[24 July 1890]*

*This letter was an unfinished draft of letter 251. It was found on Vincent’s body when he died on 27 July.

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Dear Theo: Letters from Vincent Van Gogh / Hagen

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Nevertheless, I don’t invent the whole picture on the contrary I find it readily made in

natural but in need of unraveling._ unraveling._

V Perc. Mrb.

V Perc. Mrb.
Dear Theo: Letters from Vincent Van Gogh / Hagen

To work up the heat

To melt those golds and flower tones isn’t something just anyone can do.

It takes all the energy and concentration a single individual can
Since it's still winter here, please just let me get on with my work;

if it's the work of a madman, that's just too bad. There's nothing I can do about it.

I keep thinking about the need to work, the need to work, and I believe that I'll regain my
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49

Mrb.

But I often find work so absorbing that I can become very occupied and incept.

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T


Mrb.
Dear Theo: Letters from Vincent Van Gogh / Hagen

I keep thinking, I keep thinking, the need to work, about sorting out the rest of my life.
You'll appreciate that this combination of ochre-red, green made dull with gray, and black lines defining the contours, that all this produces something of that feeling of anguish known as "black-red" often ex-
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experienced by my companions in misfortune. And for that matter, the subject of a mighty tree struck by lightning

and the sickly, green-pink smile of the last flower of autumn serve to confirm this idea.
right. a dirty matte white, dirty white, green, and a little carmine.

bowls, random rhythms, starting sparse and gaining in intensity

adding cymbals to bowl sounds, random rhythms with increasing intensity

mixing white and green, carmine.

white and green, carmine.

adding tam-tam to bowls & cymbals

white and green, carmine.

And I plastered this green tone all
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I over the sky. I plastered this green tone all over the sky.

let vibrate

tremolo sempre

I fell ill at the time I was doing the
almond blossom.

If I'd been able to continue working, (exhale) I would have done more trees in
Now the blossom on the trees is almost over, I really have no luck.

Dear Brother, through me you have your part to play in the actual production of certain canvases, which even in the midst of this di-
sas-ter
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And to be hon-est, it is on-ly through our pic-tures that we can speak.
through our pic-tures that we speak.

Dear Theo: Letters from Vincent Van Gogh / Hagen
Independently published vocal works by Jocelyn Hagen:

…and then we were left
Dear Theo: Letters from Vincent Van Gogh
Hope
Kiss
love. songs
love. songs
Songs of Fields and Prairies
The Sweetness of my Dreams
The Time of Singing Has Come

“The Flower of the Field” from Songs of Fields and Prairies
“Gwendolen’s Dream”
“i carry your heart” from love. songs
“In My Soul” from amass
“Inventing Truths” from amass
“Love Song”
“Para mi corazón”
“Silver Wing” from Test Pilot
“To My Daughter, After a Fight”
“The Wedding is the Promise” from The Time of Singing Has Come

Recordings available at JocelynHagen.com: