

Songs to the Fair Youth:
6 Songs on Fluidity
for countertenor, alto saxophone, and piano
Op. 20

dedicated to Chay Chui
commissioned by Ensemble Fioritura

Lance Mok
Text by William Shakespeare
London: April 2025

ca. 23½ mins

Sonnet 108	I
Sonnet 121	7
Romance	14
Sonnet 40	18
Sonnet 41	26
Sonnet 42	32
Metamorphosis	39
Sonnet 20	44

Songs to the Fair Youth: 6 Songs on Fluidity is part of the composer's ongoing project to set the complete sonnets of William Shakespeare into song cycles. Each cycle in the project shares a common lexicon of leitmotifs, and every cycle based on the 'Fair Youth' sonnets features an obbligato instrument. This particular cycle highlights the alto saxophone.

This work brings together six of Shakespeare's sonnets that most vividly reveal the poet's fluid approach to desire, interrogating the perceived binaries of love, sex, and gender. The cycle opens with the hymn-like reverence of Sonnet 108, which declares timeless love to the Fair Youth, only to be sharply contrasted by the operatic defiance of Sonnet 121. Here, the speaker boldly confronts public judgment and asserts the right to live and love freely. Following a Schumann-esque Romance, the love-triangle sequence lies at the heart of the cycle, where the boundaries between sexuality, desire, friendship, and rivalry blur, as the poet, the Fair Youth, and the Dark Lady become tangled in a complex web of affection and betrayal. Ambiguity shifts to gender in *Metamorphosis*, which traces a journey of self-identification and transformation. As the saxophone line cycles through many incarnations of the same motif, it gradually gains confidence through a process of perplexity and pain—a transformation that resonates deeply with the queer experience. Sonnet 20 brings the cycle to a close with a tender exploration of gender fluidity and attraction, with its inherent ambiguity mirrored in the aleatoric elements of the music.

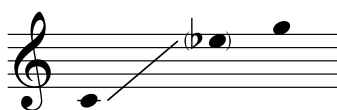
The two instrumental movements can also be performed as a separate work under the title *Romance and Metamorphosis*, Op. 20a.

The song cycle was commissioned by Ensemble Fioritura with funding from Arts Council England's National Lottery Project Grants for the project *Silhouettes of Passion's Master-mistress* and was premiered by countertenor Keith Pun and the Ensemble at Conway Hall, London, United Kingdom, on 16 May 2025.

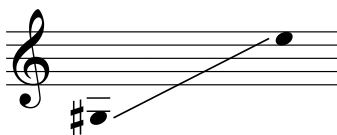
Instrumentation: countertenor, alto saxophone, and piano

The voice part is sung in English. The respective range of each song is as follows:

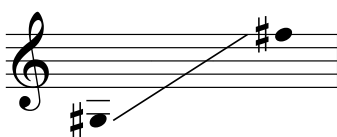
I. Sonnet 108



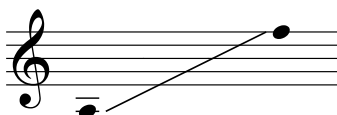
II. Sonnet 121



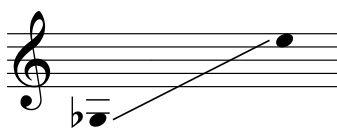
IV. Sonnet 40



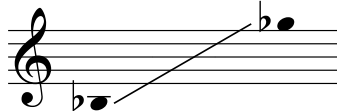
V. Sonnet 41



VI. Sonnet 42



VIII. Sonnet 20



Text

Sonnets by William Shakespeare

108

What's in the brain that ink may character
Which hath not figured to thee my true spirit?
What's new to speak, what now to register,
That may express my love, or thy dear merit?
Nothing, sweet boy; but yet like prayers divine
I must each day say o'er the very same,
Counting no old thing old, thou mine, I thine,
Even as when first I hallowed thy fair name.
So that eternal love in love's fresh case
Weighs not the dust and injury of age,
Nor gives to necessary wrinkles place,
But makes antiquity for aye his page,
 Finding the first conceit of love there bred
 Where time and outward form would show it dead.

121

'Tis better to be vile than vile esteemed
When not to be receives reproach of being,
And the just pleasure lost, which is so deemed
Not by our feeling but by others' seeing.
For why should others' false adulterate eyes
Give salutation to my sportive blood?
Or on my frailties why are frailer spies,
Which in their wills count bad what I think good?
No, I am that I am, and they that level
At my abuses reckon up their own;
I may be straight though they themselves be bevel,
By their rank thoughts my deeds must not be shown
 Unless this general evil they maintain:
 All men are bad, and in their badness reign.

Take all my loves, my love, yea, take them all:
 What hast thou then more than thou hadst before?
 No love, my love, that thou mayst true love call:
 All mine was thine, before thou hadst this more.
 Then if for my love, thou my love receivest,
 I cannot blame thee, for my love thou usest;
 But yet be blamed, if thou this self deceivest
 By wilful taste of what thyself refusest.
 I do forgive thy robb'ry, gentle thief,
 Although thou steal thee all my poverty;
 And yet love knows it is a greater grief
 To bear love's wrong than hate's known injury.
 Lascivious grace, in whom all ill well shows,
 Kill me with spites, yet we must not be foes.

Those pretty wrongs that liberty commits
 When I am sometime absent from thy heart
 Thy beauty, and thy years full well befits,
 For still temptation follows where thou art.
 Gentle thou art, and therefore to be won;
 Beauteous thou art, therefore to be assailed.
 And when a woman woos, what woman's son
 Will sourly leave her till he have prevailed?
 Ay me, but yet thou mightst my seat forbear,
 And chide thy beauty and thy straying youth
 Who lead thee in their riot even there
 Where thou art forced to break a twofold troth:
 Hers, by thy beauty tempting her to thee;
 Thine, by thy beauty being false to me.

That thou hast her, it is not all my grief,
 And yet it may be said I loved her dearly;
 That she hath thee is of my wailing chief,
 A loss in love that touches me more nearly.
 Loving offenders, thus I will excuse ye,
 Thou dost love her, because thou know'st I love her,
 And for my sake even so doth she abuse me,
 Suff'ring my friend for my sake to approve her.
 If I lose thee, my loss is my love's gain,
 And losing her, my friend hath found that loss:
 Both find each other, and I lose both twain,
 And both for my sake lay on me this cross.
 But here's the joy: my friend and I are one.
 Sweet flattery—then she loves but me alone.

A woman's face with nature's own hand painted
 Hast thou, the master-mistress of my passion;
 A woman's gentle heart, but not acquainted
 With shifting change as is false women's fashion;
 An eye more bright than theirs, less false in rolling,
 Gilding the object whereupon it gazeth;
 A man in hue, all hues in his controlling,
 Which steals men's eyes, and women's souls amazeth.
 And for a woman wert thou first created,
 Till nature as she wrought thee fell a-doting,
 And by addition me of thee defeated,
 By adding one thing to my purpose nothing.
 But since she pricked thee out for women's pleasure,
 Mine be thy love, and thy love's use their treasure.

Performance directions:

- Accidentals in the unmeasured sections in VII. Metamorphosis apply only to the notes they immediately precede.
- Other notations are explained as follows:



Align parts:

The direction of the arrow indicates the cue given from one player to another. Elsewhere, unmeasured sections should be coordinated approximately, guided by the visual alignment of musical gestures across the parts.

Score in C

dedicated to Chay Chui

致 崔子皓

Songs to the Fair Youth: 6 Songs on Fluidity

Op. 20

commissioned by Ensemble Fioritura

Lance Mok

Text by William Shakespeare

I. Sonnet 108

Moderato, molto liberamente quasi un'improvvisazione ♩ = 96

p molto rubato

CounterTENor

Alto Saxophone

Piano

Ped.

What's in the

4

3

3

brain that ink may char - ac - ter

Ped.

48 **6** *f*

Nor gives to nec - - es - sar - y wrin - kles

poco *mp*

6 *cresc.* *f*

51

place, _____ But makes an - ti - qui - ty for _____ aye his

f *mp*

mp *poco*

55 **7** *dim. poco a poco*

page, _____ Find - ing the first con - ceit of love _____ there bred Where

pp *p*

7 *mp* *p*

II. Sonnet 121

Allegro agitato ♩ = 116

Countertenor

f *poco* *f*

'Tis bet - ter to be vile than vile es - teemed When not to be re - ceives

Alto Saxophone

Piano

Allegro agitato ♩ = 116

4

re - proach of be - ing, And the just

f *ff*

f *ff*

25 4

f

No, I am

f *mp* 5:4

4

f 8 *Ped.*

27

that I am, No, *ff*

f

29

I am that I am, and

mp *f* 5:4

III. Romance

Allegro appassionato ♩. = 126

9

f *mp* *f*

f *mp*

Ped.

IV. Sonnet 40

Con disperazione ♩ = 92

molto accel.

a tempo

ff

Countertenor

Alto Saxophone

Piano

Con disperazione ♩ = 92

molto accel.

a tempo

f

Ped.

3

dim.

all my loves,

Take all my loves,

my love,

Ped.

Ped.

Ped.

31 3 *mf*

But yet be blamed, if thou this self de -

mf

3 *mf* *p*

34

- ceiv - est By wil - ful taste of what thy - self re - fus -

p

37 4 *p* *mf*

- est. I do for -

pp *mp poco*

4 *mf*

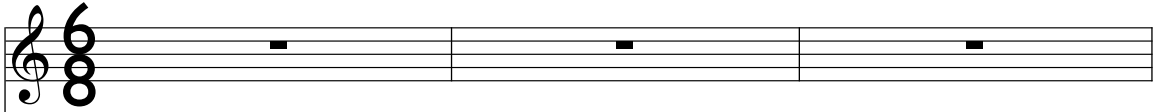
Ped. Ped.

6 Songs on Fluidity

V. Sonnet 41

Malinconico ma poco scherzando $\text{♩} = 60$

Countertenor

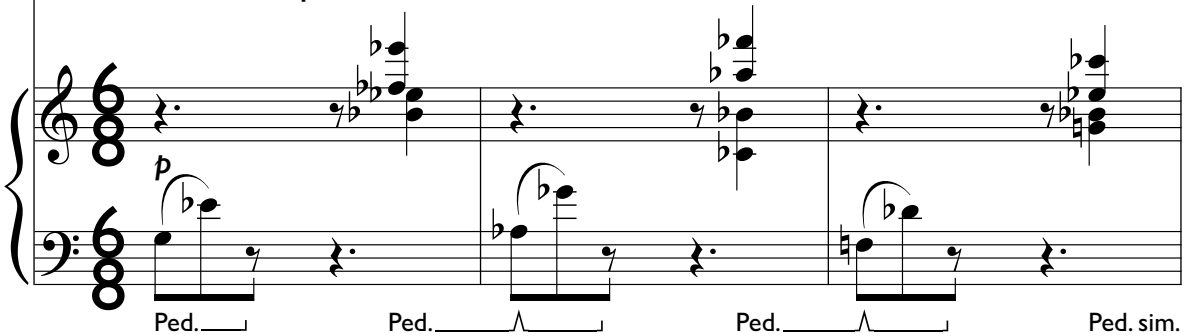


Alto Saxophone



Malinconico ma poco scherzando $\text{♩} = 60$

Piano



4

mp leggiero



Those pret - ty wrongs that li - ber - ty com -



17 **2** *mp dolce*

Gen - tle thou art, _____ and there - fore to be

2 *pp*

22 *rit.*

won; _____ Beau - teous thou art, _____ there - fore to be as -

p *rit.*

26 **3** *Meno mosso* ♩. = 34

- sailed. _____ And when a wo-man woos, what wo - man's son Will sour - ly leave her

mp **3** *Meno mosso* ♩. = 34

VI. Sonnet 42

Andantino doloroso ♩ = 92

Countertenor

Alto Saxophone

Piano

pp

p express.

Ped.

4

(Ped.)

7

poco

p

mp

That thou hast

(Ped.)

55 **allarg. grottesco**

friend and I are one. Sweet

mf *p*

allarg.

59 **7 a tempo**

flat - - tery then she loves but me a -

mf *mp* *f*

7 a tempo

f

63 **Presto ♩ = 180 molto accel. e stretto**

- lone.

f *tr* *ff*

Presto ♩ = 180 molto accel. e stretto

ff

VII. Metamorphosis

Alto Saxophone

Piano

Tentatively

pp

Tentatively

pp

Ped.

[1]

Ped. sim.

[1]

[1]

pp

(Ped.)

Ped.

allarg.

5

Appassionato ♩ = 100

allarg.

5

Appassionato ♩ = 100

56

56

57

58

59

ff

allarg.

60

60

61

62

63

64

mf

dim.

65

65

66

67

68

69

p

ff

f

rit.

70

6

Più tranquillo ♩ = 88

6

Più tranquillo ♩ = 88

70

71

72

73

74

p

Ped.

Ped.

L' (2nd D \flat) (3rd D \flat)

$\text{♩} = 44$

p legato e sempre semplice

Ped.

42 **6**

by _____ ad - di - tion me of thee de - feat - ed, By _____ add - ing one

$\text{♩} = 44$

6

(Ped.)

46 **f** **p**

thing to _____ my pur - pose noth - ing.

$\text{♩} = 44$

mf **pp**

f **p** **pp**

Ped. Ped.