

JUSTIN LAPIERRE  
VANITAS

*for Roland Kessler*

FOR VOICE AND PIANO  
*text:* ECCLESIASTES 12: 1-8 (KJV)

TORONTO/CAMBRIDGE, ONTARIO  
*c.* 5'30" — 6'00"  
2023

# COMPOSER'S NOTE

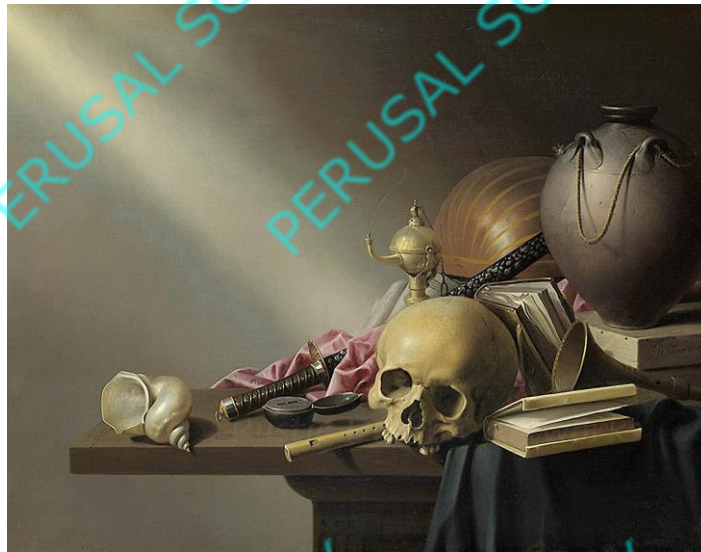
*"Vanity of vanities, saith the preacher, all is vanity".*

— ECCLESIASTES 12:8

According to the Book of Ecclesiastes, life, with all its luxuries, desires, and decisions is nothing but an entropic decline towards dissatisfaction and suffering; the more we try to exercise our own will, the more will we be disappointed in the outcome. Hence, the only solace is to abandon our earthly will and accept whatever comes our way with open arms, peacefully; this is the path to faith, says the Book. In other words, any efforts to control our lives is meaningless; yet life in itself is not. The closing lines of the Book are a call to the reader to accept this truth as soon as possible, not to let the excitement of youth blind the truth and wait until old age sets in.

The above quote inspired an entire genre of painting in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> century called 'VANITAS' paintings; these were still-life pictures cluttered with random objects in a chaotic, sometimes macabre, manner to highlight the futility of luxury and the solace of death and the divine from earthly meaninglessness.

In this piece for voice and piano, J. S. Bach's *Invention No. 1 in C major* is quoted as an embodiment of youth, which is slowly distorted until Dido's Lament from Purcell's *Dido and Aeneas* emerges from the resulting chromaticism, before both pieces are further distorted beyond recognition and only silhouettes remains. The vocalist begins by singing in consonant Baroque-style harmony as a third contrapuntal voice to the piano's two-part invention, but gradually tries to exert its own dominance over the accompaniment until nothing remains but clashing octatonic harmonies, and finally, vaguely-pitched sounds made by directly striking the piano soundboard. Eventually, music itself is abandoned, and spoken text closes off the piece.



A painting in the 'vanitas' genre by Harmen Steenwijck entitled *Still Life: An Allegory of the Vanities of Human Life* (c. 1640, Netherlands).

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<sup>1</sup> This technique of quotation and distortion thereof is known as 'palimpsest' as developed by Dr. Christos Hatzis at the University of Toronto.

## TEXT — ECCLESIASTES 12: 1-8 (KJV)

Remember now thy Creator in the days of thy youth, while the evil days come not, nor the years draw nigh, when thou shalt say, I have no pleasure in them;

<sup>2</sup> While the sun, or the light, or the moon, or the stars, be not darkened, nor the clouds return after the rain:

<sup>3</sup> In the day when the keepers of the house shall tremble, and the strong men shall bow themselves, and the grinders cease because they are few, and those that look out of the windows be darkened,

<sup>4</sup> And the doors shall be shut in the streets, when the sound of the grinding is low, and he shall rise up at the voice of the bird, and all the daughters of musick shall be brought low;

<sup>5</sup> Also when they shall be afraid of that which is high, and fears shall be in the way, and the almond tree shall flourish, and the grasshopper shall be a burden, and desire shall fail: because man goeth to his long home, and the mourners go about the streets:

<sup>6</sup> Or ever the silver cord be loosed, or the golden bowl be broken, or the pitcher be broken at the fountain, or the wheel broken at the cistern.

<sup>7</sup> Then shall the dust return to the earth as it was: and the spirit shall return unto God who gave it.

<sup>8</sup> Vanity of vanities, saith the preacher; all is vanity.

# VANITAS

FOR VOICE AND PIANO (2023)

for Roland Kessler

JUSTIN LAPIERRE (\*1998)

palimpsest on J. S. BACH: BWV 772

and H. PURCELL: z. 626

text: ECCLESIASTES 12: 1-8 (KJV)

**Allegro moderato** (♩ = c. 68)

VOICE RANGE: (C5) (C6)

**p dolce**

Re - -

**Piano** **p**

*pedal ad lib. unless marked otherwise*

3

mem - ber now thy Cre - a - tor in the days of thy

5

youth,

7

while the e-vil days come not, nor the years draw

9

nigh, when thou shalt say, I have no

11

plea-sures in them, no plea-sures in them; while the

13

sun, or the light, or the moon, the moon or the stars be not dark-ened,

15

nor the clouds, re - turn af - ter the rain: In the day, when the keep - ers of the

17

house shall trem - - -

18

-ble, shall trem - ble, and the

20

strong men shall bow\_ them-selves\_\_\_\_\_and the grin - ders cease be - cause they are

22

few, and those\_\_\_\_\_that\_\_\_\_\_look out of the win-dow be dark - -

24

ened,



26

and the doors shall be shut in the streets when the grind-ing is

28 *rit.*  
*pp*

low; And he, and

31 *accel.* **Tempo I** (♩ = c. 68)

he shall rise up, and he shall rise up at the voice of the bird,



34 *molto* *f*

and he shall rise up, And all the

37

daughters of mu- sick shall

40

be brought low; Al- so when they shall be a-

43

fraid, O when they shall be a - fraid, O when they shall

46

be a - fraid, a-fraid of that which is high, a - fraid,

*rit.*

OPTIONAL: *vocalist slowly makes their way towards the stage wings, still in view of audience*

49

*accel.* a tempo (♩ = c. 68) *pp misterioso*

and

*pp misterioso, distant like a memory*

52

fears shall be in the

54

way, and the al - mond tree shall flou -

56

rish, and the

58

grass - hop - per shall be a bur - den, and de - sire

61

\_\_\_\_\_ shall fail, \_\_\_\_\_ be-cause man go - eth in -

OPTIONAL: *vocalist slowly goes into stage wing, sings from backstage out of audience view until the end.*

65

- to his long home,

(loco)

69 *pp* (louder if singing from backstage) *tr*

and the mourn-ers, the mourn-ers go a-bout the streets;—

⑧

74

Or e ver the sil - ver cord be loosed or the gol - den

⑧

77 *> ppp* *pp*

bowl be bro - ken, Or the pitch-er be bro-ken at the four

⑧

81

- tain\_ Or\_ the wheel bro-ken at the cis - tern.

*strike soundboard strings with palm of hand*

*pp mp pp p mp*

*And*

86

*mp*

Then shall the dust, re - turn to the earth as it was: and spi - rit

*> p*

92

*f p dolce pp*

shall re - turn, re - turn un - to God

*f p (no dim.) (sudden truncated silence)*

*slap lowest few strings with palm*

97

*ppp p spoken, calm and solemn mf pp*

who gave it Vanity of vanities, all, is vanity.