Acknowledgments

Publisher:
Four Songs for Baritone: ECS Publishers
Songs of Petrarch: Boosey & Hawkes
Three Poems of Oscar Wilde: Theodore Presser
It Was a Lover and Her Lad: available direct from the composer
From the Heartland: G. Schirmer

Cover photograph: Courtesy of Mark Feiden and The Konza Press (www.thekonzapress.com)

Engineer, editing and mastering: Louis Brown
Recorded at the Louis Brown Studios, New York, New York, August 16-18, 2011.

This recording is made possible through an Eastern Michigan University New Faculty Grant and Faculty Research Fellowship.

Many thanks to those who have supported, nurtured, and encouraged me during this project, especially:
My wife, Kristin, and children, Sam and Anna, for their love, support, and inspiration.
This project would never have happened without you.
My parents, for always encouraging me to follow my dreams; and my brothers,
for propping me up when things got tough along the way.
My amazing collaborator, Arlene Shrut, whose friendship and laughter helped to bring this music to life.
My colleague and friend, Alissa Deeter. You are the finest teacher I know.
My voice teachers: Cora Enman, Timothy Caldwell, and Roy Delp.
You each helped me to find my path at just the right moment.
My musical mentors: Robert Murphy, Robert Hohner, and the entire Traverse City Area Public Schools Music Department.
My students. You continue to inspire me with your energy and joy of learning. Thank you for teaching me every day!
Special thanks to Eastern Michigan University for their financial support of this project.
Renaissance Men: Four Modern American Composers

America’s contribution to art song has been viewed frequently as complementary — a convenience of programming after the requisite “standard” repertoire has been addressed. The body of European vocal literature since 1800 makes up a substantial portion of the entire genre and is a large Goliath to the comparatively younger and still burgeoning American counterpart. As American vocal literature continues to build momentum into the 21st century, it is timely to look back and praise the groundwork laid by those compositional ancestors who resonated the first ripples of an American presence in art song, including Stephen Foster, Charles Ives, Amy Beach, and John Duke, to name just a few. This first eminence wave set the stage for a new generation of composers who are carrying the torch forward into the next era of vocal literature as the new modern American composers of art song.

Kirke L. Mechem (b. 1925)

Born and raised in America’s heartland, Kirke Mechem grew up in a household cultivated for a life of artistic affluence. His father was a prolific author of plays, poetry, and novels, while his mother was an accomplished concert pianist. After his service in World War II, he enrolled briefly as an English major before switching his studies to composition at Stanford under the tutelage of Sandor Salgo and Leonard Ratner. He later did his graduate studies at Harvard with Walter Piston and Randall Thompson, earning a masters degree in 1953. Over the course of his career Mr. Mechem has been a highly successful conductor, teacher, and composer, writing for almost every genre. His common-sense approach to composing has made him an accessible champion to music lovers world-wide. He states, “I don’t want to find new music ‘interesting’ in a purely intellectual way; I am impatient with novelty or experimentation for their own sake.”

Four Songs for Baritone was premiered in 1957 by the Metropolitan Opera baritone Ted Uppman. The artistic legacy of the Mechem family is realized through these settings of poems written by the composer’s father, Kirke Field Mechem. “The Green-Blooded Fish” poetry was penned after the English author G.K. Chesterton read the newspaper headline “A Green-Blooded Fish Has Been Found In The Sea,” remarking it would make a good refrain for a ballade. The elder Mr. Mechem has made him an accessible champion to music lovers world-wide. He states, “I don’t want to find new music ‘interesting’ in a purely intellectual way; I am impatient with novelty or experimentation for their own sake.”

Thomas Pasatieri (b. 1945)

Thomas Pasatieri is an impressively prolific composer, not only can he boast a notable output of operas and hundreds of art songs, he can include in his opus numerous chamber and orchestral pieces, choral works, and film orchestrations. In fact, anyone who might say they have never heard the work of Pasatieri need only be steered towards the soundtracks of iconic movies such as The Little Mermaid, Scent of a Woman, and The Shattershank Redemption to realize how often one does hear Pasatieri. His lineage is pure pedigree, having worked early in his development with the legendary Nadia Boulanger and subsequently at Juilliard with Vittorio Giannini. Pasatieri’s style is an affirmation to his musical heritage, composing in the spirit of traditional values, while imbuing an air of romantic introspection.

The widow of George London commissioned Three Songs of Oscar Wilde for Thomas Hampson in 1998. Oscar Wilde was a stylish and witty aesthete who was part of the late 19th century Decadent movement in Britain. These particular Wilde poems examine contrasts of the human condition: conflict and control, joy and pain, true and false, and love and lust. “Hélas” offers a beautifully lyric appraisal, evaluating the choice of decadence over virtue. “The Harlot’s House” is a grim narrative, at once lurid and intriguing, and is a masterpiece of decadent verse and melody. “Requiescat,” Latin for “Rest In Peace,” is a heart-breaking elegy of the narrator’s struggle to lay to rest his beloved.

Dominick Argento (b. 1927)

Dominick Argento is considered an American patriarch of lyric opera. After an education that included the Peabody Institute and Eastman School of Music, Fulbright and Guggenheim fellowships sent him to Italy to study with Luigi Dallapiccola. Upon his return from Europe, he taught at Eastman and directed the Hilltop Opera in Baltimore. However, his true calling did not present itself until he relocated to the Twin Cities, immersing himself in the cultural explosion fueled by the Guthrie Theater. The lure of a local theater, void of the demands of a larger city, afforded Argento the confidence to resist compositional trends and be true to his personal tastes, which include a penchant for order while creating lyric lines over lavish harmonies. All in all, his creations are holistic with an intellectual eye focused on content as well as composition. “My interest is people,” he states. “I am committed to working with characters, feelings, and emotions.”

Three Songs of Petrarch was premiered in 2007 by internationally recognized baritone Ronan Collett. The sonnets is a vivid, whirling commentary on the dust storms of Kansas in the 1940s. “Elegy” possesses a plaintive vocal line underscored by the song of the whipoorwill, an American night bird considered a symbolic death omen. “Song” sees the seasons in a juxtaposition of youth growing old. “Declaration” has the temperament of an old man, demanding the respect aged wisdom affords, yet possessing an intimate understanding of the tenacity of youth.
are of Francisco Petrarca (1304-1374) who is often regarded as the “Father of Humanism,” a movement that emphasized the worth and dignity of the individual. Indeed, in a time when few could read or write, Petrarach almost single-handedly incited a passion for knowledge that spread across Europe within his own lifetime. The three sonnets in this cycle express the beginning, middle, and end of Petrarach’s love for a woman named Laura. Whi Laura was, or whether she truly existed, is a debate that will probably never find complete resolution; however, Argento has taken the stance that Laura was not a product of fiction but rather an actual woman. In the composer’s words, “On the basis of Petrarach’s original language — unstilted and passionate — and a denial he makes in a letter to a friend who accused him of ‘inventing’ Laura… I opted to consider her a real person. Therefore I assumed that Petrarach’s passion for Laura was sincere, profound and abiding. The music I have written for these sonnets is a product of that view.”

**Timothy Hoekman** (b. 1954)

Timothy Hoekman has truly taken up the mantle of the musical Renaissance man. With a Bachelor of Music degree from Calvin College, a Masters of Music from Peabody Conservatory, and Doctor of Musical Arts from the University of Michigan in Piano Performance, Timothy is the performer-composer personified. His active career boasts a professorship in collaborative piano at Florida State University in addition to various duties and positions that have included conducting, music administration, academic writing, vocal coaching, and performance. His reputation and abilities have taken him across the globe as a soloist and collaborative pianist in the U.S., Europe, Canada, and Australia.

With such commanding musical and intellectual dexterity, it makes sense that Hoekman’s compositions are equally as impressive, carefully crafted with discernible detail to the poetry and vocal line. He began composing in graduate school and his output is largely for voice, many for his wife, soprano Carla Connors. When asked about his primary musical influences as a composer, he states, “I don’t think saying that you are influenced by any composers means you will sound like them. I think it is all about your own voice.”

The duet “It Was a Lover and Her Lad” was written for Alissa Deeter and Robert Peavler in the spring of 2011, expressly for this CD of American songs. It is a playful romp through parts of three Shakespeare poems, each of which includes a pair of lovers. The duet weaves the three poems together, with the two characters sometimes answering each other from different poems. The perspective of the duet is slightly out of the ordinary. By its midpoint, the boy realizes that, although he thought he was the seducer, the girl has bested him in that game. At this point, the familiar “It was a lover and his lass” changes to “It was a lover and her lad.” Shakespeare, could he envision the 21st century, probably wouldn’t mind.

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**Robert Peavler, baritone**

Baritone Robert Peavler serves as Assistant Professor of Voice at Eastern Michigan University. A native of Traverse City, Michigan, he received his training from Central Michigan University and Florida State University. As an active recitalist and soloist, Dr. Peavler consistently programs new works by American art song composers. Dr. Peavler is a frequent adjudicator for solo ensemble festivals and a frequent presenter at regional and national conferences. As a member of the National Association of Teachers of Singing (NATS), Dr. Peavler has been a participant of the NATS Foundation Intern Program, served as a state board member for Wisconsin and Michigan, and has published in the Journal of Singing.

Active in the College Music Society (CMS), Dr. Peavler has served on the CMS National Committee for Music in Higher Education and currently serves on the Committee for Academic Citizenship. He was a member of the three-member panel discussion “University Life as a Professor: Preparing DMA/Ph.D. Students for Navigating University Life, Cultures and Environments” at the 2009 CMS National Convention in Portland, Oregon and participated in the panel “Academic Citizenship in the Fine Art of Communication” at the 2010 CMS National Convention in Minneapolis, Minnesota. Prior to joining the EMU faculty, Dr. Peavler taught at Indiana University of Pennsylvania, University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point, Columbus State University, Chicago State University, and College of Du Page. He has served as a vocal instructor and staff choir conductor at Blue Lake Fine Arts Camp, as well as on the staff of the New York State Summer School for the Arts (NYSSSA) Choral Studies Program as a voice teacher and opera director. Dr. Peavler’s students consistently place at the top of their divisions in state and regional auditions and he is proud of their contributions as music teachers and professional singers across the country.

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**Alissa Deeter, soprano**

Soprano Alissa Deeter is a nationally recognized performer with firm footing in both classical and musical theatre circles. She is an active recitalist with a penchant for French mélodie as well as the treasured compositions of Gershwin, Porter, Berlin, and Weill. Additionally, she is a founding member and co-director of The Miscreants Cabaret, a fringe theater troupe in San Francisco that regularly writes, produces, and performs original works.
Kirke Mechem: Four Songs for Baritone

The Green-Blooded Fish

“A green-blooded fish!”

What! A green-blooded fish?
I shake out the paper, and again I peruse
This item that swims with a vegetable swish
Out of the fairy books into the news.

Yes, there is the label the scientists use
When Latin and Life must be made to agree;
There it is in defiance of doctorate views:
“A green-blooded fish has been found in the sea!”

O, singers of songs!
Here’s a green-blooded fish
A throb with the ocean’s own emerald hues!
Atlantis be yours or whatever you wish
To inspire your dreams and enliven your muse!
Rise, sirens, and sing to the seagoing crews
Where glistening mermaids laugh gaily alee;
Dive, naiads, where lusty old Neptune pursues:
“A green-blooded fish has been found in the sea!”

O, skeptics who scoff
with your “pish” and your “tish,”
Who so doubtful, deny, and so scornful, abuse,
Take heed lest the answer, “A green-blooded fish
Has been found in the sea,”
will rebuke and confuse.

There’s many a mystery deep in the ooze
That cannot be fathomed by you or by me,
And laugh as you will or denounce as you choose,
“A green-blooded fish has been found in the sea!”

On, Prince! the unknown is an ocean we cruise!
No more let our shallops be found at the quay.
Blow winds! Rattle sails!
Let us hast our adieus!

July Rain

There is a ghostly autumn haunts July
When summer nights give way to drifting mists
And breezes freshen in the foggy sky
And the melancholy moon floats where she lists:
The inexplicable season,
full of sadness,
Of premonitions, of unreasoning sorrow,
That strike a terror at the heart of gladness
With vague forebodings of the unborn morrow.

Arlene Shrut, piano

Arlene Shrut, is a collaborative pianist with a flair for the visionary: combining tradition with transformation. This two-fold passion guided Arlene to become Founder and Artistic Director of New Triad for Collaborative Arts, a non-profit educational and arts service organization, which provides classically-trained musicians with professional presentation skills that lead to more engaging concerts. New Triad’s innovative interdisciplinary training helps artists dramatically increase both the expressiveness and visual impact of their performances.

Dr. Shrut is a Senior Coach at the Marcus Institute for Vocal Arts of The Juilliard School as well as a Vocal-Piano Recital Faculty Coach at the Manhattan School of Music. An admired keyboard performer hailed as a “strong and sensitive pianist” by The New York Times, Arlene has performed in major venues in America, Canada and Europe, and recorded for Dorian, Albany, Summit, Centaur and Orion labels. Ms. Shrut also launched The National Association of Accompanists and Coaches and taught on the faculties of Syracuse University and Mannes College. During the summer of 2009, her teaching and performing was featured at Vancouver International Song Institute, Operafest on Martha’s Vineyard and Resonanz Festival. In the summer of 2010, she also joined the Atlantic Music Festival faculty and guested at Songfest in Malibu. Arlene’s ongoing activities in the operatic realm include serving as official pianist for international competitions sponsored by The Loren Zachary Society, The Gerda Lissner Foundation, The Licia Albanese Fuccini Foundation and the Giulio Gari Foundation. She was coach/pianist for Arizona Opera’s last complete Ring cycle and has performed in many gala concerts sponsored by the America Wagner Society. Arlene was a member of the coaching staff at the Aspen Opera Theater Center for 14 summers, where she taught seminars on Mozart and German opera. Arlene was honored in 2003 as inaugural “Coach of the Year” by Classical Singer Magazine.
The shadows fall now over the sunny days,
Shadows of unseen figures,
dark with all the vain Wild questionings
that mournful autumn lays
On the despairing heart,
that mournful autumn lays on the despairing heart.

Now with the rain
Falls this strange time of sighs and fears,
Falls this strange time of sighs and fears,
That catch the throat and fill the eyes with tears.

Inferiority Complex
The Spirit funs before the hounds in cry,
Stumbles, is chained amid there sound and fury,
Is arraigned, and stands before the savage eye of Demos
and the hydra-headed jury.

It cowers, a criminal, faltering in the dock,
So hemmed about and shouted at
and torn By shyster insolence
that even the shock
Of honest justice could not well be borne.

The verdict Guilty,
up springs the feverish mind,
Vituperates the court,
and round and round
Cries, to High Heav’n for Justice;

so to find the evidence perjured,
Justice, so to find the evidence perjured.
Meanwhile, never a sound
From the crushed spirit,
Fainting in it’s cell,
Suffering the torments of a prisoner’s hell.

A Farewell
Before it was spring
And I was a man,
I gave you my heart,
As only youth can.
I gave you my heart,
Naïve as a youth,
Believing love beauty,
And beauty all truth.
As only youth can,
I swore I was blest,
With love like a shadow
Clasped to my breast.
With love like a shadow
Grotesque on the pyre
Where youth burned to ashes
With lust for the fire.

Clasped to my breast
No more!—nor Farewell;
And may we meet never,
This side of hell.

Texts reprinted courtesy of Keke Mechem.

Hélène
To drift with every passion till my soul
Is a stringed lute on which all winds can play,
Is it for this that I have given away
mine ancient wisdom, and austere control?
Methinks my life is a twice-written scroll
scrawled over on some boyish holiday
with idle songs for pipe and virelay,
which do but mar the secret of the whole.
Surely there was a time I might have trod
the sunlit heights, and from life’s dissonance
struck one clear chord. One clear chord to reach
the ears of God:
Is that time dead? Lo! with a little rod
I did but touch the honey of romance —
And must I lose a soul’s inheritance?

The Harlot’s House
We caught the tread of dancing feet,
we loitered down the moonlit street,
and stopped beneath the harlot’s house.
Inside, above the din and fray,
we heard the loud musicians play
the ‘Treues Liebes Herz’ of Strauss.
Like strange mechanical grotesques,
making fantastic arabesques,
the shadows raced across the blind.
We watched the ghostly dancers spin,
to sound of horn and violin,
like black leaves wheeling in the wind.
Like wire-pulled automatons,
slim silhouetted skeletons
went sliding through the slow quadrille,
Then took each other by the hand,
danced a stately saraband;
Their laughter echoed thin and shrill.
Sometimes a clockwork puppet pressed
a phantom lover to her breast,
Sometimes they seemed to try to sing.

Sometimes a horrible marionette
Come out, and smoked its cigarette
upon the steps like a live thing.
Then turning to my love I said,
“The dead are dancing with the dead,
the dust is whirling with the dust.”
But she—she heard the violin,
and left my side, and entered in.
Love passed into the house of lust.
Then suddenly the tune went false,
the dancers wearied of the waltz,
the shadows ceased to wheel and whirl.
And down the long and silent street,
the dawn, with silver-sandaled feet,
Crept like a frightened girl
Requiescat.
Tread lightly, she is near
under the snow,
Speak gently, she can hear
the daisies grow.
All her bright golden hair
 tarnished with rust,
She that was young and fair
fallen to dust.
Lily-like, white as snow,
She hardly knew she was a woman,
so sweetly she grew.
Coffin-board, heavy stone,
lie on her breast,
I vex my heart alone
she is at rest.
Peace, peace, she cannot hear
lyre or sonnet,
All my life’s buried here,
heap earth upon it.

Dominick Argento: Three Sonnets of Petrarch

Sonnet 63 (Volgendo gli occhi)
Casting eyes upon my newfound paleness,
people cannot help but think of death,
yet you were moved by pity; whereupon
my heart, greeted so gently, clung to life.
The fragile life that lodges within me still
was a gift freely bestowed by a glance from your beautiful
eyes, and by the sweet and gentle voice of an angel.
To them, I know, my being owes existence:
As exhausted sheep respond to the shepherd’s prod,
thus, my weighed down soul was also aroused.
My heart, dear lady, is unlocked only with those keys
in your possession; of that I am content,
and ready to live in whatever condition you please;
to me, your every gift is honor sweet.

Sonnet 164 (Or che’l ciel)
Now that sky and earth and wind are hushed
and beasts and birds in sleep are silenced too,
Night steers its starry chariot through its course
and even the waveless sea retires to bed.
I see, I think, I burn, I weep, and she, my undoer,
is ever before my eyes as sweet punishment;
I wage a war against myself in anger and pain,
and only in thoughts of her do I find peace.
And thus it is that from one clear living fountain come
both the bitter and the sweet whereon I am sustained;
A single hand both stabs me and also heals the wound;
and that is why my suffering will never cease,
I die yet am reborn a thousand times a day,
while release from pain remains far, far away.

Sonnet 300 (Quanta invidia, io ti porto)
What a grudge I hold against you, selfish earth,
embracing her of whose sight I am deprived,
denying me the look of the lovely face
where, after all my strife, I had found peace!
What a grudge I hold against a heaven that shuts
and locks its gates, and with such greediness, received
with open arms the spirit of her graceful form
while for others, the gates are seldom unlocked!
What a grudge I hold against those fortunate souls
who enjoy the pleasure of her sweet and holy company
which I, with the utmost eagerness, had always sought!
What a grudge I hold against hard and pitiless Death
who, having extinguished my life through her,
now dwells in her lovely eyes and does not send for me!

Timothy Hoekman: It Was A Lover and Her Lad

It was a lover and his lass,
With a hey, and a ho, and a hey no-ni-no,
O mistress, mine, where are you roaming?
Under the greenwood tree
O stay and hear; your true love’s coming,
Who loves to lie with me,
That can sing, both high and low,
Come hither, and turn your merry note,
Unto the sweet bird’s throat.
Come, trip no further pretty sweeting;
Journeys end in lovers’ meeting,
Every wise man’s son doth know.
Come kiss me,
Sweet and twenty,
Youth’s a stuff will not endure.
It was a lover and her lad
That o’er the green cornfield did pass,
In the spring time, the only pretty ring time,
When birds do sing,
hey ding-a ding,
Sweet lovers love the spring.
Between the acres of the rye
these pretty country folks would lie,
In the spring time, the only pretty ring time,
When birds do sing,
hey ding-a ding,
Sweet lovers love the spring.
This carol they began that hour,
with a hey, and a ho, and a hey no-ni-no,
How that a life was but a flower
in the spring time, the only pretty ring time,
When birds do sing,
hey ding-a ding,
Sweet lovers love the spring.
And therefore take the present time,
with a hey, and a ho, and a hey no-ni-no,
For love is crowned with the prime,
Come kiss me, in spring time,
the only pretty ring time,
When birds do sing,
hey ding-a ding,
Sweet lovers love the spring.

Kirke Mechem: From the Heartland

1. Recitative and Aria
Dust
The other day [about 1940] a New England paper ran a story about the dust-storm years in Kansas and said it was doubtful at the time if the state would survive them. Then a west coast editor asked if anybody had checked on that lately. Since then, similar remarks have been bandied about the country.

It’s true that we’ve been dusty at times, friends, yes, Yet never entirely, so far as we know, dead.
No. And it’s very doubtful if Death does really Ever taste of dust. I mean, pure prairie dust.
Hardly anybody in fact would tell you it did Unless he hailed from somewhere round New England Or down east some place, fogbound near the ocean.
What they call dust back there’s like Death’s; it’s muggy, Gray, grubby, dank, rank, yeasty—not dust at all.
Not dry, warm, light, fine, bright, sunny, airy
Dust off a prairie. The truth is, friends,
Both oceans are short on good prime dust, not to mention
The Great Lakes and the Gulf. I’m talking about
The historical truth that many an old line horsethief From California or the Far West some place
Would often after a sudden demise spring up,
Come April, into a lovely pink-white flower
Out of Kansas dust. That is, if he wasn’t first
Left hanging up too long in a clammy gale
Down off Lake Michigan or a mildewed breeze
Out of the south somewhere. There’s certain cadavers - And I’m not necessarily meaning horsethieves
Or editors—that even the dust of Kansas
Couldn’t bring back from the dead no matter what.

2. Elegy
Shadows of the Moon
Night falls, star-silent. Even the cottonwood trees Grow hushed and still, and all the pale green grass Upon the field breathes quietly. No breeze Disturbs the shadows of the moon. They pass Like wreaths, like phantoms, fearful of her face, Along the hedge row, stealthily and still, Below the pasture wall, and leave no trace Where she looks for them on the purple hill. They are not there … Only a burning star Glows in the silence on its rounded crest, Throwing a radiance like a fiery bar Across the pathway of her lonely quest; Now, as she hunts them, faintly down the hill Falls the far crying of a whippoorwill.

3. Song
I Could Hear the Least Bird Sing
In my boyhood, in the spring,
When the world and I were young,
I could hear the least bird sing Songs no bird has ever sung.
And in summer, in my youth As an eagle climbs the sun, I could reach the starry truth Men of earth have never won.
Now in autumn, in the fall, When the birds are flying far, All the truth seems very small And a star is but a star.

4. Declaration
Let us gather now, my friends, and consider In our old age the strange ways we have come, And make such bold judgments as our years Warrant, forgetting timidity. Come and ignore too, With a well-tempered mind, the loving tolerance, Bitter-sweet, of sons and daughters, and all The relegation of the world … This I, This unwrinkled ego, wrapped in the wrinkled Shell of crusted time, seems fresh to me still, As you, no doubt, to you - although to youth Inconceivable. Easy for us, friends, to remember Youth, but for youth to imagine the ten-fold Anomalies of age, how preposterous. Therefore, Standing alone, as needs must now be, come! There are manifestos yet to be written in this world. Texts reprinted courtesy of Kirke Mechem.
From the Heartland

Robert Peavler, baritone
Arlene Shrut, piano

Kirke Mechem (b. 1925)
Four Songs for Baritone*
1. The Green-Blooded Fish [2:53]
2. July Rain [4:38]
3. Inferiority Complex [2:40]
4. A Farewell [2:07]

Thomas Pasatieri (b. 1945)
Three Poems of Oscar Wilde
5. Hélas [3:19]
6. The Harlot’s House [3:42]
7. Requiescat [3:55]

Dominick Argento (b. 1927)
Songs of Petrarch*
8. Sonnet 63 [3:16]
9. Sonnet 164 [4:02]
10. Sonnet 300 [3:24]

Timothy Hoekman (b. 1954)
It Was A Lover and Her Lad* [5:37]
with Alissa Deeter, soprano

Kirke Mechem
From the Heartland*
12. Recitative and Aria: Dust [4:48]
14. Song: I Could Hear the Least Bird Sing [4:29]
15. Declaration [3:46]

Total Time = 57:28

* world premiere recording