

EPIGRAMS, EPITAPHS note

Epigrams, Epitaphs was commissioned in 1986 by the Grand Rapids [MN] Area Community Chorus, which wanted a new work for a program that also included the *Liebeslieder Waltzes*. This was the impetus for the four-hand piano accompaniment as well as the inspiration for the fourth song, stylistically an homage to Brahms. Looking for texts, I found Ben Jonson's "On My First Son" and fell in love with it. The poem set the tone for the entire work; all of the texts deal in some way with death (of beauty, of the poet, of two dickey-birds), which in turn inspired the occasional use of the piano as a great tolling bell. The first three poems are also brief enough to be epigrams, hence the title.

FIRST PERFORMANCE

27-28 March 1987
by the Grand Rapids Area Community Chorus
James Clarke, Director
Davies Theatre
Grand Rapids, MN

The Lady Who Offers Her Looking-Glass to Venus

Venus, take my votive glass;
Since I am not what I was,
What from this day I shall be,
Venus, let me never see.

Matthew Prior (1718)

My Own Epitaph

Life is a jest, and all things show it;
I thought so once, but now I know it.

John Gay (1720)

On the Setting up Mr. Butler's Monument in Westminster Abbey

While Butler, needy wretch! was yet alive,
No gen'rous patron would a dinner give:
See him, when starved to death and turned to dust,
Presented with a monumental bust!
The Poet's fate is here in emblem shown:
He asked for bread, and he received a stone.

Samuel Wesley (1726)

Epitaph on Two Piping-Bullfinches of Lady Ossory's,
Buried Under a Rose Bush in Her Garden

All flesh is grass, and so are feathers too;
Finches must die as well as I and you.
Beneath a damask rose, in good old age,
Here lies the tenant of a noble cage.
For forty moons he charmed his lady's ear,
And piped obedient oft as she drew near,
Though now stretched out upon a clay-cold bier.
But when the last shrill flageolet shall sound,
And raise all dickybirds from holy ground,
His little corpse again its wings shall plume,
And sing eternally the self-same tune,
From everlasting night to everlasting noon.

On the Other Bullfinch, Buried in the Same Place

Beneath the same bush rests his brother –
What serves for one will serve for t' other.

Horace Walpole, Earl of Orford (written 1783, published 1798)

On My First Son

Farewell, thou child of my right hand, and joy;
My sin was too much hope of thee, lov'd boy,
Seven years thou wert lent to me, and I thee pay,
Exacted by thy fate, on the just day.
O, could I lose all father, now. For why
Will man lament the state he should envy?
To have so soon 'scap'd world's, and flesh's rage,
And if no other misery, yet age?
Rest in soft peace, and, ask'd, say here doth lie
Ben. Jonson his best piece of poetry.
For whose sake, henceforth, all his vows be such,
As what he loves may never like too much.

Ben Jonson (1616)