



Artifacts

Setting fifty lines of “burnished verses” by Samuel Lee.
This work was commissioned by Jennifer Tham
to celebrate the 50th anniversary
of the SYC Ensemble Singers,
and will be premiered in December 2014.

Eric Banks

*Dedicated to my friends
Jennifer Tham and Albert Yeo*

Artifacts

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About this work

I first encountered Jennifer Tham and the SYC Ensemble Singers in the summer of 2005, at a choral festival in Bandung, Indonesia, where I had the extreme pleasure of watching several hours of their private rehearsal before a festival workshop. I loved the rapport that Jen shared with her singers, and how she was able to accomplish such complex and expressive musical tasks with the simplest of instructions or even a single gesture. My second impression of SYC and Jennifer came in the summer of 2012, when I came to Singapore to attend the Asian premiere of my work, *Twelve flowers*. This is rather imposing 14-minute *a cappella* work in eight parts, in both Japanese and English, and Jen had been rather apologetic in advance about the choir’s modest preparation. When I arrived early to the rehearsal, I will never forget how the members of the Ensemble Singers were strewn backstage in small enclaves, rehearsing together the various sections of my piece that were still challenging them. These enclaves were not comprised of members in the same section. Rather, they were mixed, and every singer was required to sing his or her own part independently with (or against) the other singers in the enclave. Then, the members of the enclaves switched around, to try out sections with different singers. The whole process was so disciplined, so inspiring, so organic. I felt honored to have my work performed by singers who evinced such attention and care.

Over the years, Jen and I have always enjoyed reconnecting at various conferences and symposia. She is my “go to girl,” a wonderful colleague that is fun to spend time with - we both love coffee, lingering meals, round things, and everything about the Pacific Northwest. Whenever we “talk shop,” we learn so much from each other, and she is one of very few people that I allow to photograph me. Recently, in a second balcony in Seoul, we even got scolded for whispering too loudly during a concert. If ever I were to get into trouble at a professional event, I would prefer that it be with Jen. I trust her with my friendship, with my musical reputation, and with my music.

It was on my trip to Singapore in 2012 where Jen brought up the idea of a commission for the 50th anniversary of the SYC Ensemble Singers. At first, I thought that I would be able to choose and set my own text (and began to wander into the mysteries of Cantonese literature). Jen rescued me from this potentially thorny thicket earlier this year, when she suggested that I look at the poetry of Samuel Lee, a current singer in the ensemble. After meeting him online, I asked Sam to send me all of the poems that he felt comfortable sharing publicly. From these poems, I chose (and/or adapted) 50 lines - in order to reflect the 50th anniversary of the ensemble. The title of the piece, *Artifacts*, was inspired by SYC’s campaign on Facebook (called *Artefacts*), which has highlighted various different accomplishments of the group - one for each week of this anniversary year. In choosing from Sam’s texts, I sought those that would be fragmentary (part of a larger thought or event), leave an imprint (either visual or emotional), and contribute to the overall narrative of marking time. Hence, my selection of “burnished verses” as the descriptive phrase for these texts.

With these fragments of Sam’s texts, I have created fifteen different scenarios (places, times, emotional states), which I will delineate here. In [I.], I have tried to capture the moment of quiet when we can only hear our own “breathing.” (Notice the rhythm of this word, which I tried to score similar to breathing.) It is at this moment that we can safely question ourselves, and try to uncover those things buried deep within us. In [II.], the increasing howl of the wind (through rising scales and shifting unvoiced fricatives) leaves us wondering about our own frailty. In [III.], the bright, saturated green of joy is matched by the final, climactic urgings to repeat the song, over and over again. In [IV.], the “waltz of names” begins with a proud declaration, and descends voluptuously into the contours of the unknown. In [V.], alternating heartbeats in the outer voices frame an intertwining duet in the inner voices, which rises with longing and resignation to an insecure conclusion. In [VI.], the swamp is not entirely lonely; with various unvoiced and voiced consonants through the octaves, the wind moves through the reeds, and a couple of dragonflies (*libelulle*) interrupt the solitude. In [VII.], the rising sevenths resemble the waves in the harbor; but as these dissonant intervals are stacked, they begin to take on the image of the thickly crowded city - quite the opposite scenario of the solitary swamp. In [VIII.], the accompanying voices use five liquid consonants to prolong the salient pitches of these transparent melodies. These five phrases should be like encountering five different roses, along with their lingering fragrances. In [IX.], the bustling cityscape frames the haze of the setting sun (scored in the voices of the soprano, baritone, and bass sections). The day ends contentedly, and without regret. In [X.], the waxing and waning clicks of the accompanying voices form an arid landscape, full of insects - while the half-phonated phrase implies an even drier world. In great contrast to the chaos of clicks, [XI.] moves slowly, with the lugubrious self-satisfaction of a sweet reward. In [XII.], the folding pentatonic eight-notes refer to the rigors of *origami*, but the graphic notation of the staff itself refers to more. Maybe one of the singers will be able to spot it! ☺ In [XIII.], I have tried to combine the wonder of this rare astronomical event with Sam’s banal commentary by treating the shooting star like a holiday sparkler (*scintilla*) - and have placed this effect in the oscillating unvoiced fricatives of the inner voices. In [XIV.], the “swing” of the jungle is created in the ambiguous meter of the accompanying voices, while the certainty of one’s favorite wishes is placed in the octave melody of the outermost voices. This conviction carries into the descending parallel tenth duet (in the mezzo and bass voices) of [XV.], a faith that is framed by the repeated rhythmic motive found at the beginning, in which the word “breathing” has been replaced by “knowing.” Perhaps, the transformation of the piece could be: that all of the questions we ask ourselves have, in our hearts, already been answered.

Thank you, Jen and SYC, for this wonderful opportunity, and congratulations on your golden choral anniversary!



The burnished verses

- 1 I. This is the present:
2 the aching, backbreaking present.
3 We ask ourselves where we are,
4 not knowing that the answer lies
5 buried within us, still breathing.
- 6 II. Is the body so soft
7 that it cannot feel the wind
8 howling through its own architecture?
- 9 III. Sing this to the grass.
10 Repeat.
- 11 IV. We pronounce the names of things
12 and anticipate the slightest possibility
13 that we might be able to
14 slide our fingers down their contours,
15 understand their shapes,
16 and manage our desire.
- 17 V. I have only ever been adjacent to love,
18 absorbing its tendencies,
19 like gauze upon a wound.
- 20 VI. I sit by the reeds.
21 This is all that I have.
- 22 VII. I see the waves
23 licking upward with salt and fish,
24 and the bobbing boats,
25 like a crowd of heads in the dusty city.
- 26 VIII. I cannot tell you
27 how to grow your own roses,
28 only that you should begin
29 when the air is warm and dewy.
- 30 IX. There are only two things on my mind:
31 how mild the day has been
32 and how slowly the sun is edging its way
33 between the gaps in the skyline.
- 34 X. It hasn't rained for a month.
- 35 XI. Through the honey-edged night,
36 expectation is thick
37 like sweet cream on a butter biscuit.
- 38 XII. The moon is tucked into the heart
39 cleverly, like origami.
- 40 XIII. Above, a shooting star completes the cliché.
- 41 XIV. Let me sleep beneath the Big Dipper,
42 eat another biscuit in this pouring rain,
43 feel my toes again.
44 Then swing me past the fern fronds
45 and the smoky byways
46 into this green lung,
47 the tangled jungle of our youth.
- 48 XV. I will tell you this:
49 I have put my faith
50 in a new way of knowing.

Performance notes

- II. In creating the "pitched" sounds of the wind, each singer should sing the scalar cell (in each box) three times, each in his or her own time, but in a quick, individual tempo. The IPA characters in the score represent the following sounds:

- ϕ unvoiced bilabial fricative (exhaling through a tight w)
θ as in thin
ʃ as in shin
ç as in the German word ich
x as in the German word ach
f as in fin
H a strong prolonged h, through the vowel of hat
M a windy prolonged h, as in the first phoneme of what

- VI. The sound of the wind in the reeds is created by inhaling and exhaling (*in* and *out*) through the shapes of these letters:

f s ʃ θ

- The sound of the dragonflies is created by gradual and individual slides between the following letters:

- v as in van
ð as in than
z as in zinc
ʒ as in pleasure

- VIII. The fragrance of roses is created by prolonging these letters:

- l as in lamb
m as in man
n as in nab
ŋ as in song
r as in ran (in American English)

- VIII. The movement of insects is created these clicks:

- ⊙ unvoiced bilabial click (the sound of popping bubbles)
| as if shaming someone, written as *tsk* (at the palate)
|| as if calling a horse (a click at the molars)
! unvoiced apical click (with a flat downward tongue)

- XIII. The sparkling star is created by the slow oscillation between two of the following three consonants:

- f as in fin
θ as in thin
ʃ as in shin

Artifacts

Samuel Lee

Eric Banks

I. $\text{♩} = 66$

p quasi echo
S This is the pre-sent: the a - ching, back-break-ing pre - sent.
mp
M This is the pre - sent: the a - ching, back-break-ing pre - sent.
p
A Breath - ing, breath - ing, breath - ing,
1
T Breath - ing, breath - ing, breath - ing,
R Breath - ing, breath - ing, breath - ing, breath - ing,
B Breath - ing, breath - ing, breath - ing, breath - ing,

S We ask our-selves where we are, not know-ing that the an - swer lies bu-ried with-in us,
M We ask our-selves where we are, not know-ing that the an-swer lies bu-ried with - in us,
A breath-ing, breath-ing, breath - ing, breath-ing,
5
T breath-ing, breath-ing, breath - ing, breath-ing,
R breath-ing, breath-ing, breath - ing, breath-ing,
B breath-ing, breath-ing, breath - ing, breath-ing,

S still breath-ing, breath-ing, breath-ing, breath-ing...

M still breath-ing, breath-ing, breath-ing, breath-ing...

9 A breath-ing, breath-ing, breath-ing, breath-ing, breath-ing...

T breath-ing, breath-ing, breath-ing, breath-ing, breath-ing...

R breath-ing, breath-ing, breath-ing, breath-ing, breath-ing...

B breath-ing, breath-ing, breath-ing, breath-ing, breath-ing...

II. ♩ = 208 (♩. + ♩. + ♩.)

S *come il vento* *p* ...howl - - - ing...

M *p* ...wind... *mp* ...wind...
each cell is to be sung thrice by each singer in the section, each in their own time

A *come il vento* *p* ...howl - - - ing...

15 T *p* ...wind... *mp* ...wind...
each cell is to be sung thrice by each singer in the section, each in their own time

R *p* Is the bo - dy so soft... *mp* that it

B *p* Is the bo - dy so soft... *mp* that it

SAMPLE

3

S ...howl - - - - ing... *mp* *mf* ...howl - - - -

M ...wind... *mf*

A ...howl - - - - ing... *mp* ...howl - - - -

20 T ...wind... *mf*

R can - not feel the wind... *mf* howl - ing through its own ar - chi-tec - ture,

B can - not feel the wind... *mf* howl - ing through its own ar - chi-tec - ture,

S ing... *f* howl - - - ing through its own ar - chi-tec - ture?

M *f* **X** **f** **H** **M**

A ing... *f* howl - - - ing through its own ar - chi-tec - ture?

25 T *f* **X** **f** **H** **M**

R howl - - - ing through its own ar - chi-tec - ture?

B howl - - - ing through its own ar - chi-tec - ture?

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III. $\text{♩} = 224 (\text{♩} + \text{♩} + \text{♩})$

S *mp* Re-peat. *mf* Re-peat.

M Sing this to the grass. *mf* Sing, *f*

A *mf* Sing this to the grass. Sing this to the grass. *f* Sing,

30 T Re-peat. *mp* Re-peat. *mf*

R Re-peat. *mp* Re-peat. *mf*

B Re-peat. *mp* Re-peat. *mf*

S *f* Re-peat.

M sing this to the grass. *ff* Sing, sing, sing this to the

A *ff* sing this to the grass. Sing, sing, sing this to the

35 T *f* Re-peat.

R *f* Re-peat.

B *f* Re-peat.

molto cresc.

S Re-peat, Re-peat, re-peat, re-peat, re-peat...

M grass. Sing this to the grass. Sing this... *f* *p*

40 A grass. Sing this to the grass. Sing this... *f* *p*

T Re-peat, Re-peat, re-peat, re-peat, re-peat... *molto cresc.*

R Re-peat, Re-peat, re-peat, re-peat, re-peat... *molto cresc.*

B Re-peat, Re-peat, re-peat, re-peat, re-peat... *molto cresc.*

IV. ♩ = 96

S *pe* ...names, names, names,

M *p* ...names, names, names,

46 A *p* ...names, names, names,

T *mf* We pro-nounce the names of things, and an-ti-ci-pate the

R *mf* We pro-nounce the names of things, and an-ti-ci-pate the

B *p* ...names, names, names,

SAMPLE

S names, names, names, names, names, names,

M names, names, names, names, names, names,

A names, names, names, names, names, names,

52 T slight - est pos - si - bi - li - ty that we might be a - ble to slide our fing - ers down their con - tours,

R slight - est pos - si - bi - li - ty that we might be a - ble to slide our fing - ers down their con - tours,

B names, names, names, names, names, names,

S names, names, names... I have

M names, names, names... I have

A names, names, names...

58 T to un - der - stand their shape, and to ma - nage our de - sire. I have

R to un - der - stand their shape, and to ma - nage our de - sire. I have

B names, names, names... I have

V. $\text{♩} = 63$

S
been, on - ly e - ver been, on - ly e - ver been, on - ly e - ver

M
been, on - ly e - ver been, on - ly e - ver been, on - ly e - ver

A
mf
I have on - ly e - ver been ad - ja - cent to love, ab - sorb - - - ing its

64 T
on - ly e - ver been ad - ja - cent to love, ab - sorb - ing its ten - den-cies, like

R
on - ly e - ver been, on - ly e - ver been, on - ly e - ver been,

B
on - ly e - ver been, on - ly e - ver been, on - ly e - ver been,

S
gradual cresc.
been, on - ly e - ver been, on - ly e - ver been, on - ly e - ver

M
gradual cresc.
been, on - ly e - ver been, on - ly e - ver been, on - ly e - ver

A
gradual cresc.
70 ten - denc-ies, like gauze up - on a wound, ab - sorb - - - ing its ten - denc-ies, like gauze up - on a

T
gradual cresc.
gauze up - on a wound, ab - sorb - ing its ten - den-cies, like gauze up - on a wound, I have

R
gradual cresc.
on - ly e - ver been, on - ly e - ver been, on - ly e - ver been,

B
gradual cresc.
on - ly e - ver been, on - ly e - ver been, on - ly e - ver been,

8
SAMPLE

S
been, on - ly e - ver been, on - ly e - ver...

M
been, on - ly e - ver been, on - ly e - ver...

76 A
wound, I have on - ly e - ver been ad - ja - cent to love.

T
on - ly e - ver been ad - ja - cent to love.

R
on - ly e - ver been, on - ly e - ver...

B
on - ly e - ver been, on - ly e - ver...

VI. ♩ = 92

S
spoken calmly, nearly together
I sit by the reeds. *pp come le libellule* 3

M
p out **θ** *in* **θ** *pp come le libellule*
v → ð → z

A
whispered calmly, nearly together
I sit by the reeds. *pp come le libellule* 3

82 T
p out **f** *in* **f** *out* **θ** *in* **θ** *out* **s** *in* **s**

R
p out **s** *in* **s** *out* **ʃ** *in* **ʃ** *pp come le libellule*
v → ð → z

B
p out **f** *in* **f** *out* **θ** *in* **θ** *out* **s**

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spoken calmly, nearly together

pp come le libellule

S This is all that I have. 3

M *in* **s** *out* **s** *in* **f** *out* **f** *in* **f** *out* **f**

whispered calmly, nearly together

pp come le libellule

88

This is all that I have.

3

T *out* **f** *in* **f** *pp come le libellule* $v \rightarrow \delta \rightarrow z$

R *in* **f** *out* **f** *in* **\theta** *out* **\theta**

B *in* **s** *out* **f** *in* **f** *pp come le libellule* $v \rightarrow \delta \rightarrow z$

VII. ♩ = 88 (♩. + ♩)

S *p* I see the waves,

M *p* I see the waves,

A *p* I see the waves, I see the waves,

94

T *mf* I see the

R *p* I see the waves, I see the waves,

B *mf* I see the

SAMPLE

98

S I see the waves, and the bob - bing boats,

M I see the waves, and the bob - bing boats, and the

A I see the waves, and the bob - bing boats,

T waves, lick - ing up - ward with salt and fish, and the bob - bing

R I see the waves, and the bob - bing boats, and the

B waves, lick - ing up - ward with salt and fish, and the bob - bing

102

S and the bob - - bing boats, in the dust - - y ci - ty,

M bob - bing boats, in the dust - y ci - ty, in the

A and the bob - - bing boats, in the dust - - y ci - ty,

T boats, like a crowd of heads in the dust - y

R bob - bing boats, in the dust - y ci - ty, in the

B boats, like a crowd of heads in the dust - y

SAMPLE

DO NOT PRINT

S in the dust - y ci - ty, in the dust - y ci - ty...

M dust - y ci - ty, in the dust - y ci - ty...

A in the dust - y ci - ty...

106 T ci - - - ty, in the dust - - - - - y

R dust - y ci - ty...

B ci - - - ty, in the dust - - - - - y

VIII. ♩ = 84

S *pp* come un fragancia

M *p* ...ci - ty... *mp* I can - not tell you

A *p* ...ci - ty... *pp* come un fragancia

110 T ci - ty... *mp* I can - not tell you

R *p* ...ci - ty... *pp* come un fragancia

B ci - ty... *pp* come un fragancia

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SAMPLE

116

S *η*

M how to grow your own ro - ses,

A *l*

T how to grow your own ro - ses,

R *m*

B *n*

116

122

S *l* *m*

M on - ly that you should be - gin when the air is

A *m* *n*

T on - ly that you should be - gin when the air is warm,

R *n* *l*

B *l* *η*

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