

LISTEN UP!

Suggested Listening Activities for VCE Music Style and Composition

Katun River Songs

Composer: Part 1 – Matan Franco – *This Story*; Part 2 – Lisa Illean – *After Image*; Part 3 – Jack Symonds – *Serenade*; Part 4 – Adam Yee – *Katun River (Rushing Sounds)*

Composer information:

[Matan Franco](#)

[Lisa Illean](#) and more [here](#)

[Jack Symonds](#) and more [here](#)

[Adam Yee](#)

Date of composition: 2017-18

Instrumentation: voice, piano

Performers: Lotte Betts-Dean (mezzo-soprano), Edit Golder (piano)

Duration: 19.00 (complete set of four songs)

Background Information

The Project

Melbourne Art Song Collective commissioned four composers to write one song each for their 2018 program *The Debussy Project*.

In 2018, musicians around the world marked the centenary of the death of one of France's most famous and popular composers: Claude Debussy. [Melbourne Art Song Collective](#) celebrated Debussy's music through performing a selection of his *Piano Preludes* and songs, alongside four new Australian songs inspired by this music.

The Poems

The texts are taken from Cassie Lewis's 2016 collection, *The Blue Decodes*. Cassie is a Melbourne-born poet, currently resident in New York. You can read the four poems in edition 53 of [Cordite Poetry Review](#). *Please note that this is copyright material.*

The topic provided to contributors for this edition was *The End*.

Katun River is mentioned in the first poem. It is a remote mountain river in the south of Russia, near the borders of Mongolia and Kazakhstan. It is fed by glaciers in the Altai Mountains, and is known for its wild beauty, turbulent waters, and white-water rafting adventures.

Activities

Part 1 – The Story

The poem is full of powerful imagery and strong emotions. The composer has responded to this with expressive word-setting, use of a wide vocal range, varied piano accompaniment, and dramatic contrasts, all building to an exciting climax.

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Katun River Songs continued...

Describe ways in which the composer has made effective musical choices to capture the mood or meaning of the text. Focus on short extracts from the song to support your claims.

Notice that near the end of the song the composer repeats sections of the text. Why do you think he might have done this?

Part 2 – After Image

If you had to choose one word to describe this song, it might be “restrained”.

List the ways in which music elements are used to achieve this quality.

Part 3 – Serenade

This song has been called “disturbing, yet exhilarating”.

There is a sense of urgency and panic bubbling through this song. We hear wild flurries of notes, sudden changes to tense stillness, dramatic outbursts, whisperings, wide melodic leaps, extended vocal techniques, words repeated and fragmented...

Listen again to the song, this time following the written text. Choose three sections of the song that you find “disturbing, yet exhilarating”.

Describe how the composer has achieved this in these sections through his use of music elements, and the interaction of the voice and piano.

Part 4 – Katun River (Rushing Sounds)

This song provides many contrasts to the previous song *Serenade*.

Make a list of contrasting features between the two songs. It might be useful to present your findings in a table.

Questions for discussion—the four songs as a group

Why do you think the Melbourne Art Song Collective chose four composers to write one song each, rather than one composer to write all four songs?

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Discuss the similarities and differences in compositional approaches between the four songs.

Do you think the four songs would make an effective group if performed as a continuous set, without the Debussy piano solos in between? Why, or why not?

Creative Responses

Choose one or two lines from the Cassie Lewis poems that particularly captured your interest while listening to the songs.

Focus on the text, and consider ways to set it to music. Your musical solutions might be totally different to those of the composers heard in these videos.

Spend time exploring the meaning, mood, or images evoked by the text.

Explore its musical possibilities through speaking or singing the text, and experimenting with chords, melodies, textures, and rhythmic ideas.

Make some initial decisions such as: slow, medium, or fast tempo? Metre? Instrumentation? Melodic range? Flowing melodic style, or highly rhythmic?

Set your chosen line/s to music for solo singer and one instrument. You may choose to repeat some words, or parts of words. You may choose to extend a sung word through using melisma.

Perform your work for the class, and discuss the reasons for your musical choices.

Context

Listen to two or three of the *Piano Preludes* by Claude Debussy.

Many of the Preludes have evocative titles suggesting images, people, places, actions, moods.

Jot down ways in which Debussy's musical choices seem to relate to the titles. Explore Debussy's distinctive use of harmony, tonality, tone colour, and articulation in your chosen Preludes.

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Now consider the **Katun River Songs** again. We have been told by Melbourne Art Song Collective that the commissioned composers were inspired by Debussy's **Piano Preludes** in these songs. In the performance at Melbourne Recital Centre, the preludes and songs were interspersed throughout the program.

Have a class discussion about the ways in which you think the Katun River Songs might have been inspired by the Piano Preludes. Support your claims with examples.