

Nico de Villiers

Photo: Sebastian Charlesworth

Do Not Go My Love

‘It takes one's breath away.’

- Thomas Hampson

This year marks the centenary of the publication of Richard Hageman's 1917 setting of the Nobel laureate Rabindranath Tagore's poem *Do not go, my love, without asking my leave* from the 1913 collection entitled *The Gardener*.

In a series of interviews pianist Nico de Villiers — Richard Hageman scholar and director of the Richard Hageman Society — explores various performers' impressions of Hageman's most famous art song and his music in general. The celebrated American baritone and American song scholar **Thomas Hampson** recently discussed his admiration for Rabindranath Tagore's poetry, Richard Hageman's songs, and his fondness of *Do Not Go, My Love*.

Nico de Villiers: What made you choose to include *Do Not Go, My Love* on your disc *An Old Song Resung*?

Thomas Hampson: *Do Not Go, My Love* itself moves me profoundly. The decision to include it was because I just loved the poem, and I loved the song, and so I wanted to sing it. When I recorded *Do Not Go, My Love*, I was at the beginning of what has become a journey. I included it alongside the other songs for *An Old Song Resung* due to my intent to present a very comprehensive list of songs that were, in their day, dynamically popular.

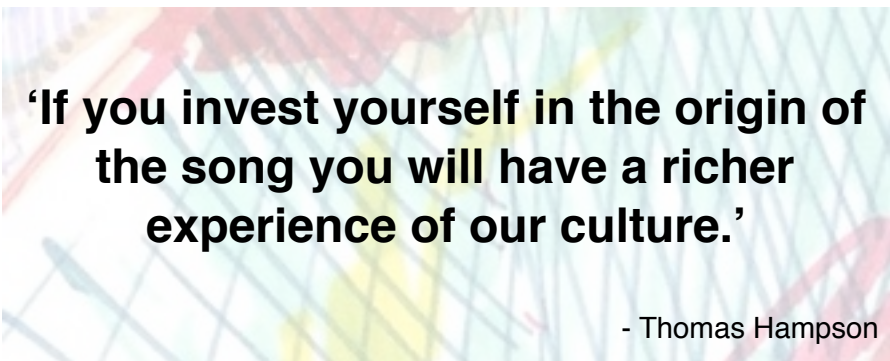
NdV: What were your initial impressions of Hageman's music?

TH: When I first came across *Do Not Go, My Love* it struck me as a highly emotional song that just works: there are not too many notes, nor too few. It



Photo: Dario Acosta

Thomas Hampson



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expresses its message directly and leaves the imagination open. It takes one's breath away if you inhabit this moment. The word that keeps popping up, whenever you read about his music, and certainly his songs, is

‘picturesque’. I think a better word to describe what is meant by that is ‘scenic.’ For me the difference between ‘picturesque’ and ‘scenic’ is this: ‘picturesque’ is description, and ‘scenic’ is experience. Hageman’s songs are beautifully written and I always have the feeling that he is setting the scene. His songs are expressive, melodically rich, harmonically — I wouldn’t say daring, but nevertheless — very much secure in the harmonic reach of the day.

NdV: Throughout your concert career — especially in your *Song of America* series — your fascination by the phenomenon of poetry-inspiring composers comes to the fore. Was this also the case with *Do Not Go, My Love*?

TH: I have always been really aware of Rabindranath Tagore. It may very well have been this song, but from whatever entrance into that world of Tagore and his poetry, it has become a very special place in my heart and my mind. My centre of gravity and so much of my life, literarily and as an American, is Walt Whitman. When you start moving, you get the Yeats connection to that, and then you run into Rabindranath Tagore, who is very much related to the Yeats school. Eventually you come out the other side and you drop into the world of Langston Hughes, and Wallace Stevens. Tagore is one of the most set poets in the English language.

NdV: What are your thoughts on the text of *Do Not Go, My Love*?

TH: *Do Not Go My Love* reminds me in context of *Befreit* by Richard Strauss. This farewell, this moment of cathartic, necessary release in a situation, that is just quite frankly unbearable. That ascending phrase [in the melody] that repeats in the poem, ‘Do not go without asking my leave’ is almost metaphysical and a release in itself. The other kind of Tagore miracle which I think Hageman completely captures, is the sadness or the sentiment of this song that is so moving. The fateful inevitability of what is about to happen, for whatever reason, is undeniable and unstoppable.

NdV: At the centre point of the poem is the question ‘Is it a dream?’ What are your thoughts about particularly this moment in the poem and the song?

TH: Out of this deep sense of loss, which is inevitable [the question arises whether] the

imminent pain is in fact the dream? Is the pain actually that I am in a dream that I will wake up from? Or has everything that I've cherished, that is now lost, just been a dream? What is my reality, from what standpoint should I deal with this? But I *can't* deal with it, ergo 'do not go my love.' With this moment being such a powerfully, emotional state, it was important to me to sing the song almost as detached as I possibly could.

NdV: What would you say are particular challenges — either technically or musically speaking — for the singer in *Do Not Go, My Love*?

TH: It's not for the faint-hearted because it's not an easy song to sing. You must be able to decrescendo, going up the scale. You must go into a rather transcendent pianissimo at the end, that lets it taper off as a wistful hope, and not a fact of departure. It's one of those songs that I'd say, 'Get off of it, don't weigh this thing down.' The technical proposition for a song like this, is can you literally *move*? If you can't move the voice lyrically through the vowels of each phrase, it doesn't matter what consonants you want to sing, you're not going to make it. If you get stuck on 'my love' in the first phrase as if that's the most important phrase to sing you're never going to sing the next phrase. It's not words on tone. The principle difference between singing and speaking, is that when we speak, we separate vowels with consonants. Which consonants at whatever speed, defines the language. In singing, every vowel we sing has every other vowel sound in it. We sing all the consonants, some of them are sung and some of them are dry, but they're all *sung*! We bind those vowels by those sung consonants, which emulates the language it's in. Then there is the tempo. The song would be deadly saccharine if it was too slow, and it would become less than real if it was too fast. You have to find that [balance], but every voice has to find that.

NdV: What would you say is Hageman's relevance in the twenty-first century?

TH: Hageman's validity in my view, is that he has written a deeply honest song that does transcend time. He fits beautifully with other Americans, which is why it is so strange that he is not even as remembered as John Alden Carpenter or Deems Taylor. Maybe it's because he wasn't such a symphonist. But I think Hageman's music is as absolutely powerful, worthwhile, necessary, valid, as any word or essence of the poem. The answer to 'Why this song?', is simply because it is, with every justification, one of the most beautiful songs in the American Classical Literature. If you invest yourself at all in why the song and why the people then you will have a richer experience of our culture. ■

Thomas Hampson enjoys a singular international career as an opera singer, recording artist, and "ambassador of song," maintaining an active interest in research, education, musical outreach, and technology. Hampson who was recently inducted into the American Academy of Arts and Sciences has won worldwide recognition for thoughtfully researched and creatively constructed programs as well as recordings that explore the rich repertoire of song in a wide range of styles, languages, and periods. Through the Hampson Foundation which he founded in 2003 he employs the art of song to promote intercultural dialogue and understanding. www.thomashampson.com