



Nico de Villiers

Photo: Sebastian Charlesworth

Do Not Go My Love

‘It comes right from the guts.’

- Armen Guzelimian

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 his 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. Los Angeles based pianist **Armen Guzelimian**, who has had a long-standing collaboration with the American baritone Thomas Hampson, shared his admiration for Richard Hageman’s songs in a recent conversation about *Do Not Go, My Love*.

NICO DE VILLIERS: *When did you first come across Hageman’s songs?*

ARMEN GUZELIMIAN: I am trying to remember the sequence of events, and it's been a long time. My memory tells me that it was Tom (Thomas Hampson) who introduced me to it because of our upcoming recording. It seems to me that we performed the song in recital first, then recorded it for EMI/Angel in London - for the American concert songs album.

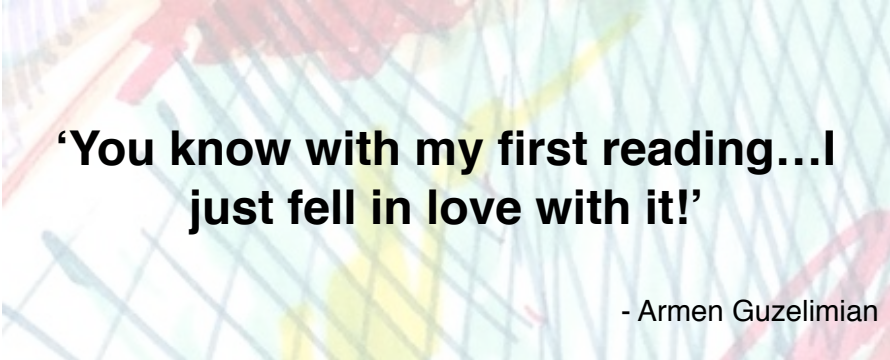
NdV: *What were your initial impressions of 'Do Not Go, My Love' when you heard it for the first time?*

AG: You know with my first reading of it — before I even read the poem completely and I was sight reading the music — I just fell in love with it! There's an instant emotional satisfaction in even the reading of Hageman’s



Photo: Philippe Morrotti

Armen Guzelimian



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music. It is so pianistically comfortable. And it's very polished writing. You're never uncomfortable about his prosody. His pianistic textures are so specific, and so married to creating the mood of the

poem. When you hear the opening of *Do Not Go, My Love* — there's so much pathos in those four pages — it immediately gets, as my mother would say, your heart strings vibrating!

NdV: *What do you think is it that establishes the pathos right there and then?*

AG: I think it's the harmonic movement alongside the intervalic relationships of the vocal line. It comes right from the guts. One cannot but observe the total equality of the piano part with the vocal line.

NdV: *I am curious to know what your views are regarding the technical difficulties of the song for both the singer and the pianist.*

AG: I think if you are technically secure, well-trained pianist you'd have no problems with this or any other Hageman songs. For the singer there is not just the need for vocal maturity but I would say the emotional maturity is also equally important, if not more. The other quality about *Do Not Go, My Love* — its right there with the pathos — is a great sense of sensuality. I think its in the piano...its so kinaesthetically satisfying to play that piano part.

NdV: *Since the whole physicality of the experience of playing Do Not Go, My Love plays an important part for you, how does that influence your interpretation of the song as a whole?*

AG: I've looked at it in at least a couple of different ways. I think the interpretation changes with whomever you are accompanying. Whether I feel discomfort because what I'm doing at the keyboard is not what I believe should happen but the singer's interpretation is different from mine — even just the vocal approach — then I have to sort of, maybe, change my pedalling a little, or the texture...not that I would want to, but in order to do the job properly. If somebody leaves that sensuality out of it and perceives it in a purer context — or whatever you want to call it — then I wouldn't be satisfied either listening to it or doing it.

NdV: *Do you think it is necessary to know the context of the whole of Tagore's The Gardener?*

AG: As background information this would help you see a clearer picture. When I first got introduced to *Do Not Go, My Love*, I knew only the song, and didn't put it into the context of Tagore's *The Gardener*. But I can look at the text in two ways and I can be convincing to myself in either one of those. One is that when the speaker says, '...is it a dream?', he cannot believe he's so lucky that this person is in his life, that she is his love, and that she's there. He just has to pinch himself to realise, 'I can't believe this is happening, that I am here with her.' Another interpretation arises from their different social backgrounds. He might be all by himself in bed at night, and he's having this intense dream. He is reaching out — maybe in the dream she's pulling away — because he's not of the same class as she is, and therefore there is no future. He's saying, 'Did I make this whole thing up? Is it a dream? Please don't go, please don't leave me alone. Did I just imagine the whole thing?'

NdV: *A certain section of American art songs from the early part of the twentieth century is often labelled as sentimental or old-fashioned. However, these are the songs that young singers, especially those in the US, often include in their recitals at undergraduate or graduate level. In 2017, the centenary publication year of Do Not Go, My Love, what would you say is this song's relevance — indeed that of Hageman — in the twenty-first century?*

AG: I agree with that remark, Nico. When I was teaching a graduate course in American Song Literature, I had a similar reaction from one or two of my faculty colleagues (not so much the students) about the old fashioned sentimentality of these "parlor songs." Some people would include Hageman's songs in that category. Hageman's relevance to me for one very specific reason is that he's almost forgotten in Los Angeles and yet he had such a presence here. I mean, aside from being the film composer who had won an Oscar he conducted the LA Philharmonic at Hollywood Bowl for several years. In terms of the classical world, they don't really know him except for *Do Not Go, My Love*. And just for that reason he should be relevant to the 21st century. The addition of Richard Hageman's presence [would] make people's awareness come to life that this was an important figure in Los Angeles history, let alone in international music history. ■

Los Angeles based pianist Armen Guzelimian is celebrated for his versatility as a top-notch collaborative artist, a brilliant soloist and first-rate chamber musician not only in Southern California, but all over the world. He has received national and international critical acclaim for his appearances in many of the the major concert halls in the U.S. And Europe.

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