

Florestan Recital Project
*Panic: a song cycle for baritone, piano, and
electronics*

Libretto

For some to give a little
is a lot for them.
For some to give all
costs them nothing.

...

It's nothing. She is
nothing to me. Why
tell of it? Hell, why
bother to recall it
at all? But it passes
the time. I am thirty.
I live contentedly

—but

yesterday the mail
brought two green-
gold feathers— devilishly green-
gold—folded in
paper and sealed
with a royal seal from
someone—oh—

I had a cabin in the Nordland...

For a single braid of seasons,
I was from lieutenant
to hunter promoted, a guest
in a settlement far away...

There night became day
with nary a star. Children
grew up in their sleep. O,

peculiar...! I knew
such peculiar people...!
I remember almost
nothing of them, nearly
nothing

of her. She is
nothing to me—

...

I had a cabin in the Nordland...

Rain or blow, no matter, no
wonder how a rainy day joy
will possess me. Obsess me.

Aesop! Come!—and he
comes, my good dog, he
shakes himself awake: Aesop!
Let's get a bird and roast it!
Good boy, harph! Aren't we
blessed? Think of them,
lucky men by their fires, angels,
well fed, asleep, still in their
togs, with their dogs!—

Only in the forest am I
whole, is my
soul still and powerful.

O Solitude, can a man
want a better bride than
you?

I belong to the Nordland
and to solitude.

Come,
Aesop, good dog, let's go!

...

Everybody thinks they're a good judge of people.
But, people! We can't all be, can we?
Besides, if you were a good judge of people,
how would you know? You could never really know that,
could you?

You can only know what you think you know.

But as for me, you might as well know right away
that I'm a very good judge of people.

Sometimes it seems I see right through to their souls.

I know them from their actions, and I see them where they
hide
in their plain and mysterious eyes.

I've been told I make some people nervous.
Well, I damned well ought to, I suppose!

...

I remember a day.
Surprised by the rain, we
sheltered in a boat house,
Aesop, and me ...

Who should duck inside with us?

The Good Merchant Mock
who owns half the shops in
the little town below,

the Wise Old Doctor
leaning on a cane,
and a girl...

Edvarda Mock!
Daughter of the Good Merchant Mock
whose cabin I was renting.
Her name comes back to me
now like a crack of lightning,
fresh! Temporal! A shock!
Little but a schoolgirl!
Is she fifteen? Sixteen?
Tall but shapeless. Long
hands, gloves off!—

Shake, hunter, shake ...
Edvarda Mock!

She falls to her knees:
She whispers, "Aesop?"
Your name is Aesop?"

She raises her veil,
reads his collar

and looks into his eyes...

"Fables!"

The rain
lifted, and I left
unaffected. Feeling

nothing. Feeling

nothing at all...

...

Do you remember the tall gray rock
in front of the cabin? I
liked that rock. I think it
liked me.

We should all be so lucky to love one so
steadfast, shouldn't we,
Aesop?

From the lee of a cliff
I watched the weather shove the ocean into shapes:
men, horses, banners tattered! Over the reef
a sea god thrashing! I went down to the sea to see the people
disembarking from the steamer:
Blue eyes, blue eyes, blue eyes, blue eyes.
Then: A dark haired girl in a snow-white
kerchief. Her name? Her name is Echo.
The blacksmith's daughter.
Echo, I tell her, you should always wear
that snow-white kerchief over your
powder black hair!

And then, one morning,
the sun was in the forest.
The sun! The sun!
The winter is done!
Exultation
thrills through me when
I see the green-gold sun
and I shoulder my gun.

...

I had a cabin in the Nordland...

Sharpening my hooks, mending my nets, I
had thoughts—irrelevant thoughts
of Edvarda Mock.

She'd visited me that first day of spring. She came
as she'd said she would, with her friend
the Doctor. She sat on my bed. Was it
wrong of me
to let her? Did I
go on too long
about what fish and game was in season? Why
had she repeated after me,
when I said my cabin (her
father's cabin) with its walls
lined in furs and feathers
was like a lair?
Yes, she said. A lair.
She'd given me her girlish hand when she entered.
Asked me about the figure

of Pan on my powderhorn.

What does it taste like, I wonder—
she said—gunpowder...
I could hardly move
in my chair, a student of her
face, her
neck. Her
pinafore low on her waist.
The wrinkles on her thumb were full of kindness.

Going so soon?
Edvarda...

I'll go after her! My net needs a bit
of silk thread ... surely she'll have some.
Come, Aesop! And I am
out the door before I remember I've
got silk thread of my own in my fly-
book. Look
at me, Aesop! Your owner's
a mess—

alone
with his alone-ness—
mending his nets—
...

Two days I go without
hunting or fishing, just
walking the forest and listening, listening!

High above the sea, a Nordland winter
is melting the mountainsides wet
and black with a
trickling melody, tricking me, lyrically, mimicking
laughter. A quenching balm that
calms me after so many months of
solitude. What a mystery: Here is this
melody, no one to listen, not to mention
the birds returning—chaffinches,
bramblings, I know all the birds
from a thousand ramblings, and
see, now, there: green shoots
of yarrow, bursts of starflower,
greenery, greenery, everywhere
the scenery, ah, how easy it is to love
the green and peaceful world!—so
pitiable, the inchworm like an inch
of green thread, dangling, rearing,
searching—o, pity it with me, won't
you, somebody, anybody, spring
is coming, the millwheel humming with
the millpond's thawing—all winter long
it was gnawing for a song! And I've been
listening: How lucky this lieutenant is
to hunt sometimes no more than
music, in solitude, that brightly
feathered thing.

I'll bring it to her,
the solitary melody of spring.

...

He cheats! The Good Merchant

Mock cheats at
solitaire!

I was his guest for a game
of whist, it seems just yesterday.
I spilled a glass of wine and they,
the Merchant Mock and
Edvarda, laughed at my
clumsiness. Ha!

But I'm a
good judge of people. Aren't I?
Aesop?

He says he cheats a bit
at solitaire to make it come out
even. Can you imagine? —?

And the last laugh's mine!
For, walking me out, the Good
Merchant Mock and I fell into
a dispute about the shortest route
through the woods to the cabin.

I took my way, he took his,
and how do you suppose he beat me?
How? By running a little.
Winded? Was he winded, well,
no, not exactly. Still...
Goodnight, we said, goodnight...

and I tracked him back into the forest, stealthy
as a wolf. I saw him wipe his forehead;
he'd been running, alright! But that's not all...

At the blacksmith's cabin where the blacksmith's daughter
Echo must fast in her bed have been asleep, did he
creep as if amongst sheep, lifting the latch,
slipping sideways in through a side door, swift
as a kerchief sliding to the floor!

And that night I told my rock to watch for him,
and Aesop not to trust him anymore.
...

Midnight!... Footsteps!... I dream
of hunting... Aesop is growling,
pacing... I place him in my
dream, but he wakes me...
makes me leave my bed for
the window.

O, what is it,
Aesop?... Two in the morning,
have we had a visit? Sweet
dream—

I still have it!...
I can
see it—
a track of footprints in the dawning
in the dewgrass...
someone...
has been peeking in the glass...

here, then there... en-
circling the seeming safety
of my nest as I lay
dreaming...
of hunting...

...
Naked under her night shift,
who is it comes
to visit me midnights, her
skin hot to the touch? Guess.
She leaves her lover high
in the trees. We're on our
knees. She says, Tie my
shoelace, lover! and I kiss her.

That is not my shoelace, she
mouths against my mouth,
...not my shoelace... ! not
my... ! not ... !

I ask her,
Have you a sweetheart, yet,
and she says, Yes, and I say,
How does he kiss you?
This way? this way? and she
says Yes! And I: And this?
And she: Ah, yes! And this
is how we lie in the ink-deep grass
while the midnight sun dips
its hot red tongue into the sea
as if wolfing down a tall cool glass.

...
Mock and the Doctor take their friend,
the lieutenant-turned-hunter, along
to share the music, the laughter, the song
of an island party!

So away go we
to row the bay, to fire two shots in salute
of the day, to bask in the glimmer and shine
of summer with a basket of wine!—a
picnic, aswirl in the veils and cotton
dresses of young girls!—my soul hoists
its sails! How fine it is, and right, that we
should rest from our toils, and ride awhile
on easy tides of love above the sea! Me!
out of uniform! witty,
carefree, tipsy...

when up she
dashes—Edvarda Mock!—in
her skirts' pretty splashes—
dashes up and wraps my neck
in a dozen sudden silken sashes
of kisses!—in view of
everyone!—reckless—brash—
her eyes aflash—everyone
watching us—

"What is it?" I ask her.

"Nothing," says she.

I turn to the party.

I beg their pardon.

Edvarda

plays on—"The hunter
for me!"

"Woman," I whisper,

so the Doctor can hear me,

"—pipe down!" Her father,

the Cheat Merchant Mock,

is down by the water, thank

Heaven!

—but oh!—

the compassion

I felt for her wilted
expression!—her whole thin

figure fallen, a wren

in a well—

Why did I tell

her pipe down? —

and I fell even further in love with her then!— ...

...

What should be done about women?

Women and the way they behave

toward men? One minute they want it

one way, then the other way around.

They are unsound! Necessary nuisances
that strike from burrows underground,

and yet they'll let you take them in

as pets if you get too friendly, and then

they rule the nest! I have such dreams

of women! They rape me in the woods,

lap me everywhere with kisses, wake

me lurching in my sheets, fleet misses,

hissing sweetly through their teeth.

God save me from them, teeming

in the rushes with their touching little

promises. Save them from themselves.

They're the ruin of the world, flute-

like voices lilting like feathers...

...

Look! Would anyone like

to see the flies in my fly-book?

I have it here somewhere

in my hunter's leathers—

I've tied them all myself. Here—

take a good look! Feathers

and hooks, and common silken

thread—that's all it takes

to catch a fish—just imagine—

feathers! and hooks. O sure, I

could buy them ready tied,

but these are suitable for me,

they're real enough to trick

enough trout to fill my creel

before an hour's cast out.—See

them, cunning little nothings,

(feathers and hooks!) wound

round, tied tightly, little

mimics, little crooks! This red

devil here took me days to get

right, a bit of Satan wrapped

in satin, pricked my finger too!

and for what? Can't catch

a thing with it!

He casts about,

your fool the hunter, doesn't

he, though?

The picnic's gone

hush.

Then the Wise Old

Doctor, bless him, answers,

"Yes, let's see them! fine

mouthfuls of feathers!"

to

which Edvarda (how she seems

to heed the Doctor!) answers

that the green ones have her

fancy.

—Keep them! I cry,

my voice too high. —Keep them

to remember me by.

Nonchalantly,

she tucks them away, turns

away from me to talk to the Doctor.

Two green-gold feathers in her

bosom pocket.

Two green-gold feathers

from some Nordland

songbird

taken.

My feathers, yes...

hookless as a dream

in the rippling stream

of her dress!

...

Wing, heart, then, if you must,

and sing! Admit it, you

loved her! I met her every day.

She came when I called her

to the mill, to the boat house,

even to my cabin. "Are you

happy, Edvarda?" "Oh,"

she says, "I shiver with it!"

"Here, you have a silver

spot of dust on your shoulder,

I shall kiss it," I tell her.

"All my war is made tender

with affection for you," but

"No,"

she says, "please don't be so kind."

Have I annoyed you? Edvarda?

Please don't ... Please don't ...

"Edvarda, you're too good for me.

God will reward you for loving me.”

“But what are you thinking of, my love,
you have tears in your eyes.” O—

“Nothing,” she says. “It sounded
so wonderful: God will reward me.
You say things that... Oh, I
love you so,” and she kisses me
ardently, right in the roadway—!

...

If I say that I love you, love, I
must say I lay awake last night
and tried to kiss through the glass
the sweet white soft soundless
moths by my firelight lured from
the darkness, the Sphinxes
silken, silvery, a flurry of pansies,
trembling; and that I found myself
stealing through a forest glittering
with moonlit wings of a thousand
tiny flying things, where the furry
ecstasy of bearberry, wolfsbane
and ling-blooms like roses made
me weep! I bent to my knees in a
feather-light steep of heather to
kiss them, the deep maiden pink
of their sleepy perfume. O love—
for loving you the world is little room...

...

The Doctor. Always
the Doctor and his
talk talk talk talk talk!

Can this be my rival,
leaning on a cane?
Edvarda must receive
him just to drive me insane.

If his clever remarks
were sparks, the woods
would be in flames!
His very dreams are
dangerous, all theory,
no animus. As a man,
he’s ineffectual. Yet
everywhere I go
I must suffer his
intellectual...

But wait—

Soon upon our shore
will come a new rival,
a man of science and a
Baron to boot! Just what
we need, what a hoot,
another gentleman caller!
A Baron, for God’s sake!
And all for Edvarda,
a line of us like elephants,
me too, and before me,
they say there was a Catholic!

Now I know what
shame is—

Choose

one of us, please,
Edvarda! Choose,
and have done!

(But no, hunter, no!—
be nice, play along!—
sing a song at the picnic,
pile politeness on politeness,
cinch the harness till it
pinches, it’s not love unless
it pains! In this game
there are no gains—
It’s not love unless it
shoots you through with pain!)

But who’s this
waiting for me
back at my cabin,
with a snow-
white kerchief in her
night-black hair!—
Echo, sweet Echo!
Stay with me there!—

...

Tell me what’s the harm in taking
one willing woman while waiting
for another woman’s arms to open?
Your hunter is no prince. But neither
is innocence innocence forever.

I’ve said it before, I’ll say it again.
If she loves her fellow women,
let her never tease her men!

...

I shoot straight.
What game I
aim for I get.
It’s how I eat.
It’s what I’m
made of, to my
core. It’s who
I am. It’s why
I came. My eye,
my trigger, my
shot, my dinner,
it’s the same.
Rain or shine,
there is no thing
on the wing
or on the run
that given time
cannot be won,
cannot be mine!

...

Damn Edvarda, Damn!—

How you confuse me!
You invite and then excuse me! You’re

kind, then you refuse me.

I am haunted—hunted by the memory
of nights when ...
nights when ...

Look! Would anyone like to see the things
Edvarda's said to me?
I keep them here between my hands like a prayer,
like an album of flies.
You tell me
which are love and which are lies.

Here's one:
"You have animal eyes."

And another:
"It can't end well, this thing we have between us.
I love you and it can't end well."

And here's one I'm no longer ashamed to show:
"We are not on a first-name basis, you know."

...

"We shall have a ball while my father's off in Russia!
For a dance floor we shall push the furniture away and dance,
hunter, shan't we,
and you shall be the last to go...!"

But when I am the last
to leave her summer party,
I see that the Doctor
has left his cane behind.

And why does Edvarda
pretend it is mine!
But it's the doctor's cane,
I cry! How did the lame
man go without his cane?

"Lame man! Lame man!
You couldn't hold your own
against him! For shame!"

And here is how she laughs
at my clumsiness.
Hear how hooked it is,
how barbed for flesh:
"You couldn't hold
your own against him!"

But he left it
so he could
retrieve it, didn't he?

Terrible,
animal,
miserable.
Damn!

So it's done.
I'm not proud of it, no!
But that night in my cabin
I put my rifle to my boot
and did my damndest
to shoot my foot clean off
with a single rapturous
blam! that echoed
blam! through the forest as if

going for a doctor!...

...

You have animal
eyes you have
animal eyes you
have animal eyes
you have animal—

—Woman—pipe down!

You couldn't hold your own
against you couldn't hold your
own against you couldn't hold your

—Fables!

Rain or blow, no matter, for
I had a cabin in the Nordland,
views of islands and the sea.
Behind me, forest. I belong
to the forest and to solitude...

You have animal—

For some to give a little
is a lot for them. For some
to give all costs them nothing.

It is nothing.
She is nothing to me.

Feathers.

...

The Doctor says you are hot as a volcano.
The Doctor says you are not a happy soul.
The Doctor says you're as cold as summer salad.
The Doctor says you're as canny as a vole.

The Doctor says you weren't spanked enough in childhood.
The Doctor says you lie about your years.
The Doctor says you sport with those who spoil you.
The Doctor says you should be taken by the ears.

The Doctor says you've too long been too proud to be too
wrong.

Your father's guest, I fell into your game...
The Doctor says there's danger in wanting a handsome
stranger
to sweep into your life and change your name...

The Doctor says you keep your father busy.
The Doctor says he's imported three or four.
The Doctor says you've driven each one crazy.
It's crazy, but I want you all the more.

...

She came to see me, eyes
shining, her face flushed
with kindness, and then
she was indifferent again.
Tell me, Edvarda, what have I
said or done to displease you
this time? Give me something
to steer by.

She turned away
to the window. She sat there
a long time. Then she said:

"One cannot always be the same."

...

Peace! God's peace

be with you, forest! Forest,
blessed be your every winged
and creeping thing! I name
them one by one. I'm walking
again, walking with the forest
surging through my veins,
dissolved in thanksgiving
for the wind's caress.

Out of the harbor I row,
to an island where no
animals nor people go,
but only the sea enfolding
me in its endless veils
of murmurings. Alone
with the world I love
again! O, blessed be
the earth and the sky's
private mercies! Blessed
be my enemies. The shore
bird's cries wonder: Why's
the hunter weeping?

He's

walking again, purple
flowers on their long stems
reaching to his knees...

sleeping in the linens
of the shadows
of the trees...

...

Clumsy? I'll give you clumsy!
Who else wears heavy hunting
boots to a dance? spills his
wine playing whist? takes the girls
too roughly by the wrists? makes
a botch of things in company?
Clumsy? Once, in dismay,
I threw Edvarda's shoe into
the bay. Why? Why do I shoot
myself in the foot every
blasted day? I belong not
with fickle city people. They
whisper and point as if I'm
on display. Isn't he quaint, our
visitor lieutenant? What great
entertainment! They're all abuzz:
Let's give him some more mixed
signals... and see what he does!

...

Her new prince, the Baron,
is leaving in the fall.
All her attentions are on him,
of course. Mock has given him
the rowboat that was mine.

Soon he'll put to sea,
but first he'll win the girl,
and let him! He's pinned
with decorations from the King's
own hand, but it's this one
that's hooked him. A man
of science...

I go into town to see them,
and the Baron wants to know
about my accident. My
accident, he calls it.
Who told him about it?
Who told him about it, I
wonder. So I ask him:
Who told you about my
accident?

Edvarda! She blushes,
and a hot shame shoots
me through: My name!
She has opened
my name in the flower
of her lips!

...

A man of science, he'll take her
like a specimen. Carefully.
Carefully, he slips her in his bag.

When I go, why does she
watch me at the window
as the leaves take their
leave-taking slow?
Is all the world a show?

She who swore my name
was nothing to her.

Here I am, a whole summer
wasted chasing a school girl,
mooning while a blue sky
beckons, rending my heart
as it mends! What a fool
I've been...

Now it ends!

...

(Echo, is it true? You're not
the blacksmith's daughter but
the blacksmith's wife? Hot
as a cinder fallen from his forge?
Edvarda told me with her
gorgeous teeth gleaming
in a laugh that still gnaws
at me. Echo?

But I love you,
says Echo. When you go,
let me go too. I love you.
When you leave here,
let me go!)

...

You couldn't make this stuff up:

Leaving Echo that night, I smack right into Mock,
about to knock on Echo's door in the dark. Ha! Caught!
While her husband works nights doing your dirty work
on the docks along the shore! Caught rat, caught skunk,
caught snake. I'll end this whole charade right here,
but he is taken aback, righteous, mentioning some ducks I shot
out of season: he'll report me. I will have to pay a fine.

Well fine, then, fine! so this is how the world comes
crashing to the sea—

Can you bear to hear the rest?
How they put me to the test?
How they made a merry mockery
of me? How Mock put poor,
sweet Echo to work like she'd
never worked before? How I
had a cabin in the Nordland roar
into flame and burn down to
nothing? How nothing in my
animal heart is the same? Old
rock, what have you seen?
Blast this town and all its fox-
fickle hypocrites! Mock's tricks
with us marionettes on his in-
visible line—well, fine, then,
fine, so this is how the world comes
crashing to the sea—me against
the world, and the world against me!

...

And then!—for shame—One day, when, with a blast of
powder,
I saluted the Baron's departure with a dynamited avalanche
of rock into the sea—who should Mock have stationed
there, in the way along the lea, to paint an upturned
boat with tar? O Echo!—tell me, who killed you?
Did he? I? She whose green feathers we ruffled?
We snuffed you like a candle—out!—O Echo!
In the way the avalanche's roar returned
to me across the bay, I heard it say:
you were in the way. You were
in the way.

...

The Doctor says I should wear my Lieutenant's uniform
if I'm to get your attention. But I don't want your
mocking attentions, my mockingbird, do I, or do I?
And yet, here it is, arrived by steamer, pressed and
perfect, gold braids gleaming, and my sword
a-clatter on the floor. Don't I look a picture making
any simple gesture! Who knows what may happen yet,
but I don't care. No more humility now, have a spark
of honor. The air of an officer, that'll impress her.
I shall wear it into town now, and in it, say goodbye.
Goodbye, I'll say. Dear sweet Edvarda, little bird, goodbye.
Ha!—Wait a minute, what am I?
I'll say, Pardon me, fair maiden, I've come to say
I'm taking the next steamer away from your

fair land. Forgive me if I do not take your hand.

But when I step into her parlor, her mouth falls open,
she gives a sidelong look like a bird in the rushes,
and blushes—She's broken form. I tell you, it's
the uniform! Leaving? she says. And I take her by
the hand!

both hands!

pull her to me!

What am I doing?

A senseless rapture suffers through me. Edvarda!—
but in a moment, she is cold again, defiant.
She draws herself up.

What a beggar I am
in my buttons and brass! I drop
her hands and she takes up a book
and makes as if to read it!

Leaving already? she says,
and, Who will come next year, I wonder, thumbing
through her book. Cunning little nothing, feathers
and hooks. And I say: Another.

...

And Aesop? she says.
Perhaps you'll give me Aesop,
to remember you by?
and I am moved by this,
the Lord knows why,
and since I can give her no kiss,
I say yes.

...

So, Aesop, come!

It's time we made
you a gift to
someone.

Someone who will
tease you and pet you
and kick you when
she wants to. O, it's
certain she'll
destroy you, toy you
up to break you
down.

There, there.

I've hired a man
to deliver you
to town.

Here he comes
now, see him,
on the roadway,
in the sun?

Come, come.

It's just a game.
It's just a gun.

Aesop.
Aesop...
Good dog.
Steady...

Ready, Aim, Gone—

...

It's nothing. She is
nothing to me. Why
tell of it? Hell, why
bother to recall it
at all? But it passes
the time. I am thirty.
I live contentedly

—but

yesterday the mail
brought two green-
gold feathers—
devilishly green-
gold—folded in
paper and sealed
with a royal seal from
someone far away—oh—

(What does it taste like, I wonder—? Gunpowder—?)

...

A chill?—

And the day goes by,
and time stands still...

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