

On Love and Storytelling with Alan Louis Smith

Elvia Puccinelli



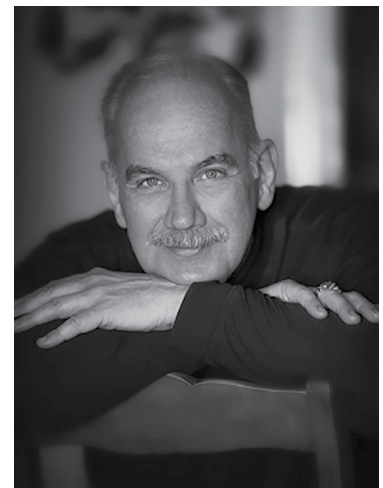
Elvia Puccinelli

Pianist-Educator-Composer-Poet Alan Louis Smith has “done it all” in the field of art song, and finds that, for him, it all comes down to “love and storytelling.” Through conversation with Smith, and drawing heavily on his own words, author Elvia Puccinelli explores Smith’s compositional output, and how love and storytelling have manifested themselves in various ways in Smith’s life and professional activity.

IF IT HAS TO DO WITH ART SONG, Alan Louis Smith has done it. Widely acclaimed as a performer and recognized as a leader in collaborative pedagogy and vocal coaching, Smith has served for more than thirty years as chair of the collaborative piano program at the University of Southern California in Los Angeles, one of the leading programs internationally for the discipline. The master coach has spent decades on the voice and collaborative faculties at the Tanglewood Music Center, SongFest and Fall Island Vocal Arts Seminar festivals. Smith *also* has an impressive forty-five year track record as an art song composer, boasting a number of prestigious commissions and settings of dozens of his own texts.¹

This column is dedicated to exploring how love and storytelling can be active and activated through our encounters with art song, using Alan Smith’s own words and music as guides.²

I first met Alan Smith in his first semester at the University of Southern California, which was also my first semester as a master’s student. From my very first lesson with him, for which I was to prepare Schubert’s *An die Leier* and the Brahms A major Violin Sonata, he stressed for me the importance of detailed narrative in my playing through a combination of imagination, score study, intention, and free physical approach to the instrument. My lesson notes, which I still have, reflect what he called “pianistic dramatics” along with foundational collaborative elements, such as playing on the vowel rather than the consonant. My artistic world was blown open. I completed both my master’s and doctoral degrees in collaborative piano under Alan’s mentorship, something



Alan Louis Smith

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I am grateful for every day, both as I exercise my current responsibilities in running a collaborative piano program, and in my day-to-day interactions with music and with people. Alan's mantra of "love, curiosity, and honesty," something he has long espoused and unashamedly shared as a life motto, plays as a through-line in his personal and professional life. He recently described it this way:

These are watchwords for my life and my teaching. I borrowed them . . . from an enlightened being named Dr. Wayne Dyer. He actually has seven points, but I just took the first three because I found they were enough for me to strive for. Love for people, music, words, the way we get to work . . . Curiosity in all ways—about other people, about words, about music, about poets, about composers, and to know our craft . . . Honesty in obeying notations, articulations, dynamics, what do they have to say, and in knowing every word. . . . A Schubert song, for instance, is a love letter directly from Schubert to me. It's much more personal—more honest—than viewing it as an interesting historical piece of music that I get to play.³

Smith's substantial catalogue of songs, which fellow composer Tom Cipullo says "rank with the best songs of the twenty-first century," reveal an omnivorous curiosity about our world, human interaction and human experience.⁴ The songs reveal many sources of inspiration—American folk song and Richard Strauss featuring prominently among them. In the last fifteen years, most of the songs are based on Smith's own texts, and reflect very personal and honest exploration of real-life situations. And with nearly every composition being written for particular friends he "loves and adores," that love fuels, inspires and informs the very composition itself. Love, curiosity and honesty.

"Writing for people I love is the greatest joy. It's all about love!"

When I write for someone, I write for their voice type, for where I imagine their voice lies well. . . . But not only for their abilities, but [also] for their soul. I try to write things I love and feel for them. I try to write things I feel are beautiful, and things I think *they* will think are beautiful.

Smith's earliest song was written in 1977, and he is at work on several projects now, in 2023. He talks about how, every step of the way, love and relationship

have formed the foundation for his compositions and compositional career, and for their organic unfolding.

In my junior year at Baylor [University], I could choose composition or conducting. Because I'm incredibly shy, I didn't want to stand in front of people [so I enrolled in composition]. Dr. John Gibson [my composition teacher] changed my life. He let me believe I could do this. A couple of years later, I wrote five songs in German for my voice teacher, John McFadden. I just did it. I wrote them for him, and I thought, "I'm just going to give them as a gift because I need to write it. I love him so much. I love his voice so much." I never dreamed that he would ever sing them. But, lo and behold, he sang them with me at the piano! His love of art song, Strauss and Wagner incited my own even more. Then, I wrote songs for [Joyce Farwell] and my friends Cheryl [Parrish] and [John] Gary [Tharp]. It was a very organic thing. With every piece I thought, "That's nice. That's a lovely piece. My friend sang that. I got to play that. Now my composition career is over." But it just kept going and I've kept writing for people I love.

Smith's love for words and their musical illustration shines through in his writing as a defining characteristic, along with his love for his muses. These muses include Cheryl Parrish, Karen Peeler, John Gary Tharp, and many other friends, including commemorating occasions such as the wedding of his beloved piano teacher, Jane Abbott Kirk. More recent muses include Diana Newman, Matthew Worth, Lucy Fitz Gibbon and Ryan McCullough.⁵ A very important muse for decades now has been Stephanie Blythe, for whom Smith annually sets a North American folk song as a birthday gift.⁶ One of Smith's most notable and frequently performed "birthday gifts" for Blythe is the set *Vignettes: Ellis Island* (1999).

Todd Sisley and I were students [of Martin Katz] together at the University of Michigan. When [Todd] was living in New York, he brought me to Ellis Island, where I had never been, and met with the curator of oral history, Todd's former partner, Paul Sigrist. [Sigrist] was the curator for all these recorded texts of immigrants who had gone through Ellis Island. Here it is again—my love for Todd, Todd's love for me, Todd's love for Paul. . . . About a month later, I get a manila folder about a third of an inch thick. [Paul had transcribed] many of the interviews of people who passed through Ellis Island. I thought "Oh that's really nice, I wonder why he sent that to me?" So, I set it on my bedside table, thinking "When I have time,

I'll read through this," but I kept thinking about these texts that were waiting for me. . . .

My buddy Stephanie Blythe had an important birthday coming up. I just adore her and wanted to write something special for her 30th birthday. The work is about 30 minutes long, and it poured out of me in seven days. . . . I'm sitting at my piano composing, I'm weeping, I'm laughing, just everything . . . and it just flowed out because of my love for these people and because I was writing for Stephanie. It was such a joy to write. Less than a year later, I premiered it with her at USC, and the set has gone on to have such an amazing life.

Vignettes: Letters from George to Evelyn (2002) set "the private letters of a World War II Bride" and was written on commission from the Tanglewood Music Center and commemorating the 80th birthday of American soprano Phyllis Curtin. Still, though, Smith admits to not yet considering himself a composer.

Then I got my. . . commission from Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center. I had, to that point, sort of refused to think of myself as a composer. I thought of myself as someone who did a lot of other things, and composed on the side but [when I received this commission, and the commission from Boston Symphony Tanglewood Chorus] I could no longer say I wasn't a composer. I began to wear that mantle joyously, but with surprise. So then, I thought, "Ok, now I'm a composer!"— but even this [commission] was for Stephanie Blythe and Warren Jones, whom I love and adore.

This work was *Vignettes: Covered Wagon Woman* (2008), a forty-five minute work for mezzo-soprano, violin, cello and piano. Apart from the three *Vignettes* cycles, Smith's compositions to this time had largely been single songs on poems by a variety of poets, but, since then, in addition to many individual songs and folk song settings as well as a work for mezzo-soprano and chorus on texts of Whitman, the composer-poet has produced seven cycles on his own texts.⁷

" . . . no words. . . . no music . . ."

As a composer, words are the most important thing to me. If there were no words, there would be no music—in my life at least.

Smith describes his composer-self as a harmonic sensualist. In all his compositions, a pairing of lush harmony

and the primacy of word—both in musical illustration and in text setting to reflect linguistic inflection—are immediately discernible. The idea of *Schwung*, (defined as forward momentum with a sense of exaltation), is also a vitally important element, and again relates to language and how individual sounds are grouped together to express meaning, based on the natural spoken inflection patterns of the language.

Smith had set the texts of over a dozen poets by this point, but even from his earliest composer days, setting the poems of his classmate Tharp provided him with a "half-way step to writing my own texts. . . . many years later it occurred to me that I might be able to write my own." In fact, most of his works in the last fifteen years are indeed settings of his own poems. "No one is more amazed about than that me," he admits.

Smith states that his poetry stands on its own, and that he does not write words necessarily to be set to music.

I want the poetry to have its own life as a poem. I'm not thinking about the setting as I'm writing the poetry, and if those ideas come, I push them away because I want the words to exist and have a power on their own. The words sit and they cook in my brain. I have a really comfy apartment in Pasadena, and I have a really comfy bed, and this happens time and time again: I'll be lying in bed, and will have written some poems, weeks, months before, and all of a sudden, a line of text comes to my brain with the music attached. It is amazing. I have no idea where it comes from. It's called inspiration.⁸

"To Tell a Life in a Line of Verse"⁹

Along with love (and curiosity and honesty) and writing for people he loves, other through-lines in Smith's work, particularly in settings of his own poetry, are not only a strong narrative sense, but a clear autobiographical one. In fact, much like Smith's musical soulmate, Richard Strauss, Smith processes what he is going through in his own life through his music.¹⁰ For example, the 2015 cycle *The Other Side of the Door* explores, as the subtitle reveals, "five aspects of love." Each song is dedicated to a friend or family member, with the composer's notes providing the context of the relationships, be it the childhood friendship of "Training Wheels," the teasing of an unnamed friend in "To My Beloved Narcissist," or the openly heart-rending "To My Dying Father, Fifty-Six Years Later."

And with Such Boldness (2017) for soprano, violin and piano, on the other hand, is a reflection on the work of Edna St. Vincent Millay, Virginia Woolf, and Walt Whitman: a text from each author is read by the performers, and is then followed by a song for the trio on Smith's own text, chronicling his personal reaction to the older author. The charming "Summer Afternoon Spider" (2019) directly addresses a spider walking across the page while Smith sits on the porch of the "yellow Victorian" house that was his Tanglewood home, while other songs explore more serious experiences and relationships, in what Diana Newman called "the duality in life and what it means to have a very full human experience."¹¹

The song "I Sing You To Sleep," from 2013's *Windows* (a cycle dedicated to Newman), is addressed to a loved one, then suffering dementia, while several songs in various cycles, including *Windows*, are dedicated to the mysterious "R." Smith's most recent cycle, *Surfing the Thin Places* (2019), "springs from the incredible, irreplaceable experience of saying goodbye and watching my mother 'surf the thin places' in her hospital bed, arriving on 'the other side,' according to her faith, to the most beautiful and radiant welcome home ever."¹²

Stories, Voices and Strong Emotional Choices

Smith tells compelling stories in his everyday life, and he is drawn to compelling stories in music. In giving music life to the voices in the stories, he seeks always the "strongest emotional choice" and said that composing has absolutely deepened his ability to make choices.

[Composing] makes me feel more connected with other composers, those who composed and made choices before me. Often it will be weeks or months before I start to set [my poetry] to music. It's been working in my head all that time, but sometimes it surprises me where it wants to go. That's true with my poetry or with anyone else's poetry.

He describes the process of setting the oral histories that would become *Vignettes: Ellis Island*.

When I opened it [the transcriptions Sigrist had sent him] and began to read, it was like opening something from Harry Potter, like sparkles and imagination and all these things. Because Paul sent those to me, because I set them to music, those people still have a voice. It moves me to say that. . . . when I wrote *Ellis Island*, some of the

people were still alive, but now they are all gone. None of them is alive anymore except through this music and through the recordings in the Ellis Island archives. You can hear their voices.

Smith also recalls his fascination with the protagonists of the other *Vignettes* cycles, Evelyn and George Honts, who spent "one magical year together before George received orders to be stationed in Europe," and Margaret Frink who, with her husband, "crossed the American continent in 1850."¹³

I love looking into those people's lives! Mrs. Frink as she crossed the western United States, the immigrants lives, Evelyn's letters from George . . . I knew her [Evelyn] personally [and George] was such a beautiful writer.

Smith continued, sharing how his own family history has influenced his choice of subject matter.

In my family, with my mother who raised us three, I have an appreciation for women in hardship. I saw my mother as a widow; I saw my grandmother who was land rich and money poor, seeing how hard she worked. I imagine how those words landed on Evelyn's ears. I read all eleven volumes of the University of Nebraska press women's diaries. So rich and amazing and heartbreaking and joyous. I saw a photo of her [Margaret Frink]; she was a sturdy looking person and I thought of Stephanie who's also sturdy looking. Connecting with the story and the emotions. I go right for the emotion [and] what will be the strongest choice that will connect with the audience.

With so many deeply personal connections, we circle back to love and to trust.

It comes back to love, because when I'm writing there are very few pieces I've written that I didn't know exactly who it was written for. [thinking of] the tessitura: what will be good for the words, what they would like to sing . . . [In *Vignettes: Covered Wagon Woman*], a lot of the writing and the piano part was because I knew Warren could wail the tar out of it to show him off and let him have a romp. Surfing [the *Thin Places*] for Ryan and Lucy, [I wrote] gorgeous soaring lines for Lucy, but also beautiful coloristic reams of notes to play, because Ryan can do that. I love them as people. The pieces for Diana, I love her, period . . . they are all expressions of love.

I worry sometimes about it being too far or too long or indulgent or out of place, but I have learned to go ahead and write it and people often respond favorably to the things I find excessive.

The storytelling for poet-composer Smith is written—literally—into the score. Program or composer notes give context for the pieces, and Smith—ever the loving teacher—includes detailed and specific instructions for performers; but is there other “storytelling” advice for performers?

[Storytelling comes from] magic, sincerity and specificity, with a spirit of “why?” in approaching music . . . using the tools of timing, touch and articulation to bring the magic to life. It’s not a diction or articulation or pedaling exercise, but specific storytelling [to create] a communal experience and communal learning through the performance.

Making Magic as a Performer

In our conversation, he stressed the importance of teachers and coaches helping performers by teaching them skills, and how to deploy them. For example:

We are seeking not just piano colors but partner colors. Pianists must build sound from the bottom up and be specific with pedal and voicing and speed of attack. It’s not just notes, but psychological and emotional storytelling. Name every motive in the song. What emotion or object is it in the text? For example, horns bring back what is lost in German music.

The skills, of course, are the tools that will allow imagination, expression and specific intention filtered through our own unique experience, to take flight.¹⁴

Always, in a song, where we have the words written by a writer and the notes written by the composer, I imagine it’s my duty, my privilege, my joy to make these words come to life and to make these notes come to life. And that’s absolutely true and that’s an important and crucial part of story-telling that we get to unlock the amazing words and notes of other composers and writers and make it our own. It enlarges us, and it changes us when we do that. . . . It also occurred to me much later in my life that the idea of storytelling means that I need to bring all of my story to whatever I’m working on . . . storytelling demands everything that I am, not shutting down any part of myself that may be really valuable and wonderful to bring this work of art to life.¹⁵

Love and Storytelling

Pianist Warren Jones, who has performed and recorded Smith’s works, sums it up beautifully:

Alan Smith is a treasured member of our community for many reasons. For me, the most important thing I think of is his honesty, his forthrightness, his maturity, his sincerity, and, most of all, his love for his fellow man, his colleagues and for music. He is one of those rare composers who has the ability to work with very economical means to make very luxurious and deep expressions.¹⁶

And with this, we arrive back at love and storytelling: love of people, of voices and stories, love of music and connection and the soul-expanding impact of connecting with partners, audiences, and artists over time. Storytelling through specificity in tone and touch, in meaning and intentional inflection, in preparation and deploying skill and craft, binding it all together through vulnerability and that love.

Because of love, curiosity and honesty we are curious because we want to be honest in our music making, it’s not just a note we are plunking down but we are painting a word . . . The training creates wideness in us as humans. It increases your ability to love humanity and sound and words, opening the shutters of your heart and letting all the light in. It brings you in touch with the most wonderful people.

Yes. Yes, it does.

NOTES

1. When I first spoke with Smith about this project, he told me to write a “fiery exposé.” While tempting to include discussions of Smith’s baked goods, Moscow mules, and handiwork (which includes quilting and latch hook rugs), I will leave it to this comment alone, letting it stand as an example of the man’s loving, playful and generous spirit, and of his prodigious way with words.
2. I met with Smith in spring 2023 specifically to discuss his work as a composer and a poet. I was also curious about the lessons for his teaching and life that may have come through this work. In addition to this conversation, I have drawn on my notes gathered through years of watching him work in a variety of settings, as well as my long knowledge of him as a teacher, artist and person. I have additionally drawn from video archives from a collaborative piano conference held 2019 under the auspices of what is now the International Keyboard Collaborative Arts Society, and from video messages prepared for the program of Smith’s songs I curated for the SongFest festival in June 2023. These recordings are not publicly available at this time. For more information about these events, please contact

the author at elvia.puccinelli@unt.edu. My sincere thanks to Tom Cipullo, Warren Jones, Diana Newman and Lisa Sylvester for their kindness, generosity and support, and, of course, my deepest gratitude to beloved Alan Smith for all the things. He knows what I was when I came to him.

3. Interview with Alan Smith, May 19, 2023. Unless otherwise noted, all quotations from Smith included here are drawn from this interview.
4. Tom Cipullo's quote is drawn from his video message sent to the author for the SongFest recital of Smith's music, June 2023.
5. The cycle *Windows* (2013) was written for Newman, and the song *Kindness* (2019), on commission from Rosemary Hyler and SongFest, was also written for her; the cycle *The Other Side of the Door* (2015) and extended song *Daniel Boone Sings to the Night Sky* (2014) were written for baritone Worth; the cycle *Surfing the Thin Places* (2019) was written on commission from Fall Island Vocal Arts Seminar for Fitz Gibbon and McCollough. This cycle is published through ECS with Sparks and Wiry Cries and Martha Guth, who hosted the premiere.
6. Many of these songs, along with most of Smith's published works, are available through Classical Vocal Reprints. In addition the ECS publication noted above, Smith's *Four Folk Songs* for soprano, viola and piano are published by Alfred Publishing Co.
7. These are: *Five Psalms of Jonathan to David* for countertenor and piano (2008); *Windows* for soprano and piano (2013); *To the Muse* for soprano, cello and piano (2014); *The Other Side of the Door* for voice and piano (2015); *I'm Memorizing You* for baritone, cello and piano, and another commission from the Tanglewood Music Center (2015); *And with Such Boldness* for soprano, violin and piano (2017); and *Surfing the Thin Places* for soprano and piano (2019). Most of the cycles contain five songs, with that number having a "certain completeness," according to Smith.
8. Interview with Lisa Sylvester for CollabFest at UNT, October 2019. CollabFest is now the annual conference of the International Keyboard Collaborative Arts Society.
9. This is the title of the fourth song of *Surfing the Thin Places*, a song which explores the challenge and privilege of expressing a loved one's impact on our lives.

10. Other similarities with Strauss include long phrases, ample use of second inversion chords for big arrival moments, "silvery" soprano writing, and *Schwung*.
11. Newman's quote is drawn from her video message sent to the author for SongFest, June 2023.
12. From the composer's notes in the score, published by EC Schirmer.
13. Drawn from composer's notes in the scores.
14. In a video message recorded for the SongFest recital of his songs in June 2023, Smith charmingly talked about curiosity and score study in this way: "*When we are in love with someone, we remember everything about them so easily because we love them so much. We need to be in love with music and our music making that much, so that we go and look that word or fact up. We also need to remember that it's ok not to know AND to then go and figure out how to find it out. Ask a trusted expert: how did you know that, how did you find that, where would you look that up?*"
15. Video message for SongFest, June 2023.
16. Jones' quote is drawn from his video message sent to the author for SongFest, June 2023.

Deeply committed to nurturing a collaborative and inclusive culture in our world by fostering the collaborative ideals of partnership, participation and presence, pianist **Elvia L. Puccinelli** is a recognized leader in connecting collaborative pianists, supporting their needs and elevating their voices. Founder and President of the International Keyboard Collaborative Arts Society, a professional association for collaborative pianists (www.ikcas.org), she is also Founder and Artistic Director of CollabFest, a professional conference devoted exclusively to collaborative piano.

A dedicated educator in the field of collaborative arts and a specialist in vocal literature, she is vocal coach and director of the Collaborative Piano program at the University of North Texas College of Music, where she has served on the faculty since 2004. A published author on topics of song literature and collaborative piano techniques, the Tanglewood alumna has served as faculty or clinician at universities and training programs throughout the world, including over a dozen years with Ann Baltz's OperaWorks. Currently also serving on the NATS *Journal of Singing* Editorial Board, Elvia holds the MM and DMA in collaborative piano from USC, under the mentorship of Alan Smith.