

Eric Schorr

# New York Pretending to be Paris

Songs of  
Remembrance and Desire

Eve Gigliotti *Mezzo-Soprano* | Jesse Darden *Tenor*  
Michael Kelly *Baritone* | The 19 Mercer Ensemble



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**New York  
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Paris** Songs of  
Remembrance and Desire

Eve Gigliotti *Mezzo-Soprano*  
Jesse Darden *Tenor*  
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The 19 Mercer Ensemble

- Flowers* (Four Poems by Cynthia Zarin)
- |   |              |        |  |
|---|--------------|--------|--|
| 1 | Flowers      | [3:03] |  |
| 2 | Monday Rhyme | [2:30] |  |
| 3 | Blue Vase    | [3:17] |  |
| 4 | Marina       | [3:49] |  |
- Eve Gigliotti, mezzo-soprano | Erika Switzer, piano
- 5 *Morning (After) Commute* (Poem by Thomas March) [2:41]  
Jesse Darden, tenor | Eric Schorr, piano
- 6 *French Novel* (Poem by Richie Hofmann) [5:50]  
Michael Kelly, baritone | Cris Frisco, piano
- 7 *In the Apartment, After You've Gone* [3:09]  
(Poem by Thomas March)  
Eve Gigliotti, mezzo-soprano | Erika Switzer, piano
- 8 *Elegy for a Small Town Psychic* [4:25]  
(Poem by Morri Creech)  
Jesse Darden, tenor | Eric Schorr, piano
- 9 *Liquid* (Poem by Aaron Smith) [4:01]  
Michael Kelly, baritone | Cris Frisco, piano
- 10 *After All These Years* (Poem by Aaron Smith) [3:40]  
Jesse Darden, tenor | Eric Schorr, piano
- Mother*
- 11 *Under House Arrest* (Poem by Susan Kinsolving) [4:00]  
Eve Gigliotti, mezzo-soprano | Erika Switzer, piano
- 12 *Remodeling* (Poem by Susan Kinsolving) [4:12]  
Michael Kelly, baritone | Cris Frisco, piano
- 13 *New York Pretending to be Paris* (Poem by Aaron Smith) [3:42]  
Jesse Darden, tenor | Eve Gigliotti, mezzo-soprano |  
Eric Schorr, piano

Total Time = 44:44



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## Mixing Memory & Desire



My journey began several years ago, when I began to read what would turn out to be many hundreds of contemporary poems with an eye (and ear) toward selecting just a few to turn into art songs. I started with the work of poets with whom I was already familiar. But I quickly branched out. I spent days in New York City's unique Poets House, where I randomly selected volumes from the shelves of its vast collection. Wherever I traveled I sought out poetry bookshops, like the wonderful Grolier in Cambridge, Massachusetts. And of course, publications like *The New Yorker*, *Poetry*, *The New York Review of Books* and *The New Criterion* were excellent sources. I happily went down many rabbit holes — a poet friend would recommend favorite poets, who would recommend others, and so on. In the end I emerged with a satisfying, if very eclectic, collection.

The poems I ended up choosing were those that immediately resonated with me emotionally and musically — by which I mean that when I first read them, I somehow heard music straightaway, prompted by the rhythm of the language, the vividness of the imagery, and the intimacy, and intensity, of the subject matter. Furthermore, the poems are inherently dramatic, and the elegance and economy of their textuality make them even more so.

Their characters and stories — of love offered only to be withdrawn; of mothers angry, happy, melancholy, brave and vengeful; of gay men searching for intimacy and a sense of belonging, sometimes successfully, sometimes not; of a small-town psychic, whose death has made an indelible imprint on her clients and leaves them wondering who, if anyone, might replace her as their guide to destiny — left me deeply moved. Even the darkest among these poems have flashes of humor and images of great beauty.

Collectively, the poems acknowledge the power of memory and desire. Who would we be without our memories, both the good and the bad? The desire to remember, and to memorialize, is often cathartic: sometimes we summon painful memories (and memorialize them by writing them down) in order to process, hopefully make sense of and possibly forget them. And sometimes our desire for memory results in a memory of desire, as when we fondly, or not so fondly, look back on a first or second love.

The four poems by Cynthia Zarin that form the song cycle *Flowers* come from various sources. The poem *Flowers*, which essentially describes a courtship, was the first work I set for this project. It begins,

This morning I was walking upstairs  
from the kitchen, carrying your  
beautiful flowers, the flowers you

brought me last night, calla lilies  
and something else, I am not  
sure what to call them, white flowers

The phrase “I am not sure what to call them” gives voice to a greater uncertainty that provides the poem with dramatic tension. A number of lines later the speaker must decide whether or not to commit to a relationship, to “come or go” but not “just stand there in the doorway.” It’s a very difficult choice, and the last words of the poem beautifully illustrate the risk involved: “I do not know how to hold all the beauty and sorrow of my life.” I found myself wanting to know what happened with this relationship. As I read more and more of Zarin’s poems, some written before *Flowers* and some after, I found others that could provide a possible answer. And the song cycle was born.

The first encounter described in Thomas March’s *Morning (After) Commute* could lead to courtship — if the speaker is willing to let it. To quote from an email the poet wrote to me, the poem captures “the combination of weariness and wonder — the desire to feel hopeful and the reactive urge to play it cool.” And if the plunge is taken, it could lead to a relationship and, in turn, a situation like that portrayed by *In the Apartment, After You’ve Gone*, which cried out for the torch-song treatment.

Richie Hofmann’s positively Proustian memory poem, *French Novel*, which I originally came across in *The New Yorker*, describes young lovers listening to “piano music.” As a musician, I found myself wondering what kind of piano music it was — Chopin, Debussy, Brahms? And that, of course, was my way in. My setting of the poem begins with the piano music, or what I imagined it to be. You hear the music again, in the midst of the poem, when it is cued in the text. Then, toward the end of the poem you hear a snippet of the piano music, and for the first time it accompanies a lyric: “snow fell in our hair.” For me, the sense of ephemerality associated with that specific image was the key to unlocking the entire treasure chest of memories described in the poem. For the record, I never asked Hofmann what the piano music he had in mind actually was. And I really have no desire to know.

Speaking of a desire to know, Morri Creech's *Elegy for a Small Town Psychic*, tenderly and convincingly paints the portrait of Clairvoyant Mabel, who, even though she had all the trappings of a con-artist (down to the turban and sequined shawl), provided answers, which I suspect were not always correct, to her clients' even most trivial questions. To whom will they turn, now that she is gone? Alas, according to the final lines of the poem, she seems to have no immediate successor: "Clairvoyant Mabel, who will conduct us now on our destined way? The tight-lipped stars have nothing left to say." What will happen once we have no one to tell us what might happen?

While reading Susan Kinsolving's poetry, I often found myself laughing out loud. Her sense of playfulness and irony is powerfully appealing, but emotional tension and unvarnished honesty lurk just beneath the surface. Both of the poems I chose, which come from separate collections written years apart, depict mothers, albeit very different ones. In *Under House Arrest* a mother gives herself permission to confess to what some might judge to be a rather reckless act. The mother in *Remodeling* commits a lot of wreckage, quite literally, and seems justified in doing so, at least as her only child remembers it.

Aaron Smith's tribute to his mother in *New York Pretending to Be Paris* is especially moving, so much so that I felt compelled to run to the piano immediately after reading it. (And its title was so evocative I felt it should become the title of this album.) His *Liquid and After All These Years You Know They Were Wrong about the Sadness of Men Who Love Men* express a profound desire for belonging, connection and intimacy, which is sometimes complicated by the unavailability of those who are the objects of our affection.

My task as a composer was to see if I could somehow "add value" to this poetry, to heighten it emotionally by taking the music that is already inherent in the text and making it come alive in a different medium. For me, this process is completely natural — but also ineffable. Because I have composed for music-theater, I am familiar structuring a dramatic song, and it seems to me a relatively small step from writing a music-theater song to writing an art song. Whether setting theatrical lyrics or poetry, I apply the same principles of word-painting and declamation. The music always must respect the inherent rhythms and cadences of the written word; every syllable must be given its proper weight and be intelligible. Ideally, when listening, one should not have to look at the text of the poem to understand what is being sung.

The range of the poems' styles and subject matter necessitated a varied musical vocabulary. Always lyrical, the music veers from Romantic to jazz to chanson to bossa nova. Though I had originally

scored these pieces for voice and piano, I was inspired by late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century orchestral songs to expand the palette of sound by adding, with the assistance of the extremely capable Nik Rodewald, the textures and colors of a chamber-sized acoustic orchestra.

The singers, of course, add their own considerable interpretive value to the enterprise. I was blessed to be able to collaborate with Eve Gigliotti, Jesse Darden and Michael Kelly, each of whom approached the material with radiant sensitivity, emotional integrity and dramatic intensity.

I was privileged to work with some of the most talented instrumentalists in New York City. And my profound appreciation goes to Paul McKibbins, our producer, and Chip Fabrizi, our engineer, who is also a professional percussionist. Both are musicians of the highest caliber and brought their considerable skill — and patience — to bear on this project.

I am very grateful to each of the poets for taking a leap of faith by generously entrusting me with their work. It was always trepidatious for me to send a poet a draft of the musical version — and acutely rewarding when they told me they enjoyed what they heard.

And finally, as for the poems themselves — I have spent a lot time getting to know them, their every sound, their every beat. It's not too far-fetched to say they have become good friends. And like good friends, they have provided much comfort and wisdom. This made my journey extremely worthwhile.

—Eric Schorr (To learn more about Eric, please visit his website: [www.EricSchorr.com](http://www.EricSchorr.com))

# Texts of the Poems

## FLOWERS

*By Cynthia Zarin*

This morning I was walking upstairs  
from the kitchen, carrying your  
beautiful flowers, the flowers you

brought me last night, calla lilies  
and something else, I am not  
sure what to call them, white flowers,

of course you had no way of knowing  
it has been years since I bought  
white flowers—but now you have

and here they are again. I was carrying  
your flowers and a coffee cup  
and a soft yellow handbag and a book

of poems by a Chinese poet, in  
which I had just read the words “come  
or go but don’t just stand there

in the doorway,” as usual I was  
carrying too many things, you  
would have laughed if you saw me.

it seemed especially important  
not to spill the coffee as I usually  
do, as I turned up the stairs,

inside the whorl of the house as if  
I were walking up inside the lilies.  
I do not know how to hold all

the beauty and sorrow of my life.

## MONDAY RHYME

*By Cynthia Zarin*

I love you in the desert  
I love you by the shore  
My love for you is a windward ship  
How could I ask for more?

It flies across the continents  
Bold frigate, carpet, centaur  
Brash rainbow studded with sylvan bells—  
Why would I ask for more?  
Love, the years are legion  
The past was white and noir  
You were on the snow-lashed steppes—  
I fished without a lure.

Now the moon has rattled  
The starry dipper poured—  
If years mean far from where you are  
I stop at any more.

## BLUE VASE

*By Cynthia Zarin*

Because you like to sleep with curtains drawn,  
at dawn I rose and pulled the velvet tight.

You stirred, then set your hand back on my hip,  
the bed a ship in sleep's doubled plunging

wave on wave, until as though a lighthouse  
beam had crossed the room: the vase between

the windows suddenly ablaze, a spirit,  
seized, inside its amethyst blue gaze.

*What's that?* you said. A slip of light, untamed,  
had turned the vase into a crystal ball,  
whose blue eye looked back at us, amazed, two  
sleepers startled in each other's arms

while day lapped at night's extinguished edge,  
adrift between the past and future tense,

a blue moon for an instant caught in its chipped  
sapphire—love enduring, give or take.

## MARINA

*By Cynthia Zarin*

The sky's grey mantle over me  
sewn with lapis lazuli—  
the terrible sky, where you walk  
in our city not thinking of me—

Your indifference bedecks me—  
the locomotive  
of my heart rattles past the crape myrtle,  
the leaves startled, buds like jewels.

The sun has no business in the sky  
nor does the moon, nor the myrtle  
or its spattered blooms, nor your gaze

now that you have turned from me.  
I am gauze printed by twilight, barely a body—



## MORNING (AFTER) COMMUTE

*By Thomas March*

As we walk out, we could be any two  
unknown, untired men.

The shirt you borrowed, just like you,  
I may not see again.

We showered and we shared some tea  
before we caught the train.

But as our hands touch on the pole  
between us, we abstain

from speaking, and I do not try  
to interrupt your gaze  
until we have to say goodbye  
and start our separate days.

Such mornings tend to leave one blue  
and grimy with regret.  
But sharing a commute is new,  
eight hours since we first met.

I'll try, then, in a day or two—  
if I should feel the same—  
this number that I have for you,  
now that I have your name.

## FRENCH NOVEL *By Richie Hofmann*

You were my second lover.

You had dark eyes and hair,  
like a painting of a man.

We lay on our stomachs reading books in your bed.

I e-mailed my professor. I will be absent  
from French Novel due to sickness. You put on  
some piano music. Even though  
it was winter, we had to keep  
the window open day and night, the room was so  
hot, the air so dry  
it made our noses bleed.

With boots we trekked through slush for a bottle  
of red wine

we weren't allowed to buy, our shirts unbuttoned  
under our winter coats.

The French language distinguishes  
between the second  
of two and the second  
of many. Of course  
we'd have other lovers. Snow fell in our hair.

You were my second lover.

Another way of saying this:

you were the other,  
not another.

## **IN THE APARTMENT, AFTER YOU'VE GONE** *By Thomas March*

The clocks have started keeping lazy time.  
The dust is slow to settle—and the air  
is thick with smells I'd never known were there  
where you were here. But now you're not. And I'm

left counting every leaky-faucet drop—  
when I can't sleep—I press my favorite shirts  
of yours, with starch, and pose them, hollow flirts  
across the backs of chairs, as if a crop

of half-formed, ghostly hints of you might keep.  
But each one wilts into a silent heap,  
as heavy wishes will incline to fail.  
Now dust will settle, and the faucet drip,  
and I will stack and sort through all your mail  
until you've come home from your business trip.

## **ELEGY FOR A SMALL TOWN PSYCHIC** *By Morri Creech*

Weekdays you rummaged through the universe  
spinning around inside your crystal ball  
for Lotto numbers, the checkout girl's lost purse,  
some plumber's vagrant niece who wouldn't call.  
Alas, the turban and the sequined shawl  
are all packed up now with your uncashed checks,  
sandalwood incense, candles, tarot decks.

The past is where we left it — swept away  
under some cosmic couch or coffee table  
where, fuzzed with lint, it will most likely stay.  
Who will reclaim for us, Clairvoyant Mabel,  
those trivial hours, and polish them to fable —  
the New Year's kiss, the wealthy man's dropped  
glove  
we might have turned to money or to love?

And the future? Time grinds forward on its track,  
keeping to schedule though you've stepped off  
board.

Great sage of horoscope and zodiac,  
nine hundred number, palm, and credit card  
— prophet the constellations once adored —  
who will conduct us now on our destined way?  
The tight-lipped stars have nothing left to say.

## **LIQUID** *By Aaron Smith*

The men of Cambridge jog  
shirtless this morning

like it's normal to be beautiful  
and looked at. Un-secreted

from coats but not-yet-tan,  
their meaty chests weave

among over-dressed pedestrians.  
I'm suddenly shy

when the young guy  
with the plum nipples, liquid

shoulders taps my shoulder:  
*You dropped this*—a post-it

I wrote on, between his finger  
and thumb. Coffee in my one hand

and a bag in the other, he pushes  
the note deep in my shirt pocket—

his knuckles to my nipple like they  
were always supposed to be there.

*So it doesn't fall out again,*  
He grins. He winks, palms

my shoulder like a father  
or boyfriend—he knows that

he knows how to dissolve me—  
*I better catch up with my girlfriend.*

The gesture raw, exposed  
as the hair on his flat, damp belly,

as the phone shoved in his shorts  
against his hipbone.

## **After All These Years You Know They Were Wrong about the Sadness of Men Who Love Men** *By Aaron Smith*

It's Palm Springs and you've slipped away  
from a day of swimming and drinking to lie  
for a minute with your eyes closed  
in the other room while the air-conditioner  
moan-groans outside your window—your body  
chilled from sunburn and untouched  
for months. Startled from near sleep  
you hear a crash  
of laughter, man-laughter, the slapping  
of bare backs, hands smacking

the skin of men drying  
by the pool or making hamburgers

in the kitchen or solving a puzzle  
on the glass table in twilight—  
*Does anybody need another drink?*  
and laughter. *The pizza's here;*  
*Can I have a cigarette?*  
*Pass the pretzels and your name:*  
*Has anyone seen Aaron?*

You don't say anything but listen to the man  
saying your name—Soon someone will be  
sent  
to look for you, and you'll pretend  
to be sleeping, say you must have dozed off,  
you'll rejoin the party soon but need  
another minute. You want  
to remember this. You've waited  
your whole life for them to miss you.

## UNDER HOUSE ARREST

### *By Susan Kinsolving*

Now that my infant is almost an adult,  
I will admit how one midnight I lifted  
her tiny body out of the crib and carried it

far into a field. There I abandoned her  
in the deep grass, alone with the blinking  
fireflies, moth wings, owl cries, one wild

chance for fear or freedom. It seemed  
a long time that I walked away, believing  
in an intimacy of earth and innocence,

some Edenesque extreme so lost before  
it was ever found. I had to give her those  
orphaned hours under a cloud-swept moon,

in the pine-scented air. When I returned,  
her eyes were wide, fixed on a galaxy,  
her arms outstretched, not to embrace me

but reaching for that first mother, the one  
beyond my absence who will always be, distant  
as the heavens, instinctual as memory.

## REMODELING *By Susan Kinsolving*

Like many new houses in the fifties,  
ours featured a shoulder-high room divider  
for plants, a leafy look-through between  
the front hall and their deadly living room.

One afternoon, with a sledgehammer  
and crowbar, my mother bashed away  
at that divider until only broken boards,  
dirt, and uprooted plants remained.

When my father returned, mother stood,  
hammer in hand, triumphant. "What the hell's  
going on in here?" he said, dropping his briefcase.  
Silent, my mother slowly smiled, a warning

(continued)

of further wreckage. At age ten  
I knew all parents' rooms were somehow divided;  
many mothers wanted to tear every damn house  
apart. But no one spoke a word. Like a trance

and a truce, in slow motion, father mixed  
a martini while mother put wilting plants  
in water. Quietly, we cleaned up the mess  
and later at a nice restaurant, enjoyed supper.

The week after, mother took a pickaxe  
to father's car. His affair with a "Born-  
Again Bimbo" had gone too far. His check-  
book was a paper trail verifying more betrayal.

## **NEW YORK PRETENDING TO BE PARIS**

*By Aaron Smith*

My mother who doesn't like to be  
seen, who never, she claims,

looks good in a photo, wanted  
us to see her framed

in the window in New York  
pretending to be Paris.

Even when she did it, walked  
Into the French bakery, sat down

at the table in front  
of the big open window

with the big open shutters  
and asked us to stay

outside, take her picture  
from the street, sitting there

with French music, French  
vases, pastries as rich

and delicious as Paris,  
we were surprised.

I thought one day she'll be gone,  
and I'll think of when she

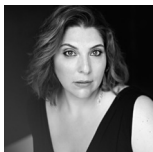
and my sister visited me,  
and we shopped and didn't

argue and she asked us  
to look at her, remember her

this way against our sad  
history, our sad futures, everything

our lives will become without  
her, because of her, after her.

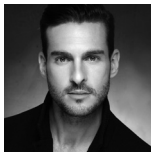
## Vocalists



Mezzo-soprano **Eve Gigliotti** has won critical acclaim for her work spanning both the dramatic repertoire and contemporary opera, including originating the roles of Ruth in the world premiere of *Dark Sisters* (Muhly/Karam), and Dodo in the world premiere of *Breaking the Waves* (Mazzoli/Navrek). She is featured as Siegrune in both HD presentations of *Die Walküre* from The Metropolitan Opera, including the Grammy Award winning recording, as well as the Met HD presentations of Rigletto and Boris Godunov and the Odyssey Opera recording of *Zanetto*. Ms. Gigliotti made her Metropolitan Opera debut as Mercedes in Bizet's *Carmen*, her Houston Grand Opera debut as Siegrune in *Die Walküre*, and her Carnegie Hall debut singing Bernstein's *Jeremiah Symphony no. 1* with New York Youth Symphony. Other notable performances include appearances with Opera Philadelphia, Los Angeles Philharmonic, Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra, Detroit Symphony Orchestra, Seattle Symphony, Florentine Opera, Wolf Trap Opera, Bilbao ABAO, Milwaukee Symphony, Oregon Symphony, Gotham Chamber Opera, Baltimore Symphony Orchestra, and the American Symphony Orchestra at Avery Fisher and Carnegie Halls.



Tenor **Jesse Darden** is an operatic artist gaining national acclaim in a variety of repertoire. Jesse made his Lincoln Center Theater debut in 2022 as Mr. Marks/Ensemble in *Intimate Apparel*. Jesse was the 2018-2019 Principal Artist-In-Residence with Boston Lyric Opera, performing roles in *Il Barbiere di Siviglia*, the world premiere of *Schoenberg in Hollywood*, *The Rape of Lucretia*, *The Handmaid's Tale*, and *Fellow Travelers*. Jesse made his Union Avenue Opera debut in 2019 in the title role of *Candide*. He spent his 2017 and 2018 summers as an apprentice artist with the Santa Fe Opera and has completed apprenticeships with Chautauqua Opera and Opera North. Jesse was a New England Regional Finalist with the Metropolitan Opera National Council Auditions, won Third Prize in the Gerda Lissner International Voice Competition, received the Chautauqua Opera Studio Artist Award, and received the Boston Lyric Opera Shrestinian Award for Excellence. He has performed roles and solos with Boston Lyric Opera, Odyssey Opera, Santa Fe Opera, Dartmouth College, the Rhode Island Civic Chorale and Orchestra, New York Festival of Song, Piedmont Opera, Chautauqua Opera, and the Chautauqua Symphony.



Praised as “mesmerizing” and “vocally splendid,” American baritone and poet, **Michael Kelly**, is celebrated for his riveting interpretations of concert, recital, and operatic repertoire. He has performed with regionally and internationally acclaimed organizations in a wide variety of styles and genres, including Carnegie Hall, Santa Fe Opera, Feinstein’s 54 Below and Theatre du Châtelet. He is an avid performer of new music, having collaborated with renowned composers to create, perform, and record multiple world premieres of their works. As a writer and performer, much of his focus is on the queer experience and LGBTQ+ advocacy. Michael is also a champion of the art song genre and is the curator for the baritone volume of art songs by living composers for NewMusicShelf’s Anthology of New Music. He is a graduate of the Eastman School of Music and The Juilliard School. To find out more, please visit [www.michael-kelly.com](http://www.michael-kelly.com).

## Acknowledgments

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# Credits

## THE 19 MERCER ENSEMBLE

Nikhil Bartolomeo, Clarinets & Saxophones

David Blinn, Viola

Laura Bontrager, Cello

Chip Fabrizi, Percussion

Cris Frisco, Piano

Kristina Gitterman, Violin

Eriko Hama, Harp

David Kuhn, Guitar

Randy Landau, Bass

Damian Primis, Bassoon

Zohar Schondorf, French Horn

Eric Schorr, Piano

Erika Switzer, Piano

Keve Wilson, Oboe and English Horn

Anna Urrey, Flutes and Piccolo

Orchestrations by

Nik Rodewald

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in New York City

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Chip Fabrizi, Engineer

Recording Produced by

Paul McKibbins



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Delta Murphy