

signum
CLASSICS



the secret letter

cantus

THE SECRET LETTER

1 Yhinx	[4.02]	10 We Two: IV. Not Heat Flames Up and Consumes	[4.09]
Abbie Betinis		Steven Sametz	
2 Canto a Elegua	[3.46]	11 Light Years to Lebanon [†]	[7.26]
Anon. arr. Arlety Valdés and Yudelkis Lafuente		Saunder Choi	
3 Love Is...	[1.03]	12 Interlude: Emily Dickinson to Susan Gilbert, Summer 1852	[1.36]
Libby Larsen		13 Before Spring [*]	[3.51]
4 Interlude: Marcus Aurelius to Marcus Fronto	[1.38]	Mari Esabel Valverde	
5 Bésame Mucho	[3.51]	14 3 Sbory mužské (3 Male Partsongs),	[3.09]
Consuelo Velázquez arr. José Galván		JW IV/19: I. Loučení	
6 Interlude: Excerpt from De Profundis	[1.32]	Leoš Janáček	
Oscar Wilde		15 Blackbird	[3.32]
7 Figure Humaine VI. Le jour m'étonne et la nuit me fait peur...	[1.53]	John Lennon and Paul McCartney	
Francis Poulenc		arr. Paris Rutherford	
8 A Source of Light I. On the Shoulders of Giants [*]	[2.10]	16 Interlude: To the One I Once Was (or Might Have Been)	[2.47]
Mohammed Fairouz		Rod Kelly Hines	
9 Interlude: Walt Whitman to Peter Doyle, August 21, 1869	[1.38]	17 We Kiss in a Shadow (from The King & I)	[3.55]
		Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein II	
		arr. Chris Foss	
		Total timings:	[51.36]

^{*} World Premiere Recordings

[†] Cantus is grateful for the generosity of Tom Arneson for supporting the commission of "Light Years to Lebanon" by Saunder Choi.

For so many, coming out is framed as a kind of reckoning—a threshold one must cross, as if queerness begins in secrecy and only later earns the right to be spoken aloud. That narrative suggests burden before freedom, fear before love. But why should love require courage simply to exist? Such is the world we've inherited. For centuries, desire that fell outside society's narrow definitions was forced underground, met with shame, exile, or silence. In that silence, letters became a refuge: fragile but fearless vessels for truths that could not be safely expressed aloud.

The Secret Letter re-imagines a program of the same name performed by Cantus in the spring of 2025, weaving music together with excerpts from letters by Marcus Aurelius, Oscar Wilde, Walt Whitman, Emily Dickinson, and others. These interludes offer fleeting access to private moments of longing, devotion, and vulnerability, while the surrounding music expands and amplifies their emotional terrain, carrying forward their tension, tenderness, restraint, and release.

Letters are remarkable things. They are both private and exposed, meant for a single reader yet capable of outliving both the writer and recipient. Passed between trembling hands, they hold confessions, desires, and love stories told in ink rather than whispers. *The Secret Letter* bears witness and celebrates queer love that has always existed—persistent, imaginative, and worthy of song—and that even in secrecy, has found ways to speak, to sing, and to survive.

CANTUS

www.signumrecords.com



TEXTS & TRANSLATIONS

1 Yhinx (Jinx)

Abbie Betinis (b.1980), text by Theocritus
(c.300 BCE - 260 BCE)

ἤδη ἤδη ταχύ ταχύ
(Now, now, quickly, quickly)

Ιυνξ : ἀβερᾶμεν θωοὺλερθεξ
ἀναξέθρελυοωθνεμαρεβα
(Yhinx: ah-behr-ah-men-thoh-oo-lehr-thex-ah-na-
kseth-rehl-oo-oh-thnem-ah-reh-bah)

Where are my bay leaves?
Come, Thestylis;
Where are my love charms?
Come, crown me the bowl with the crimson flower
o' wool...

First Barley meal to the burning,
Come, Thestylis!
Throw it on!
On, on with the meal!
So I burn the bay,
As it crackles and then - Lo!

Ιυνξ : ἀβερᾶμεν θωοὺλερθεξ
ἀναξέθρελυοωθνεμαρεβα
(Yhinx: ah-behr-ah-men-thoh-oo-lehr-thex-ah-na-
kseth-rehl-oo-oh-thnem-ah-reh-bah)

Now for the bran...
"O Artemis! Artemis!"
Whelmed in the flames!
Hark Thestylis!
Quick - beat the pan!

ἤδη ἤδη ταχύ ταχύ
(Now, now, quickly, quickly)

And as this puppet melts for me
So melt my Love so speedily -
And as this wheel of brass
Turns by grace of Aphrodite,
So (my Love shall) turn and turn again...

Lo there!
Now wave is still and wind is still,
though never still the pain burning in my breast.
For I am all afire, afire alas!
So take thou these ashes,
come Thestylis,
while tis yet dark,
and smear them privily,
and spit for what thou doest and...
Thrice this libation I pour -
Thrice this prayer...
"O Artemis, Artemis!"
Thrice I say to Thee:

λυξ : α β ε ρ α μ ε ν θ ω ο υ λ ε ρ θ ε ξ
α ν α ξ ε θ ρ ε λ υ ο ω θ ν ε μ α ρ ε β α
(Yhinx: ah-behr-ah-men-thoh-oo-lehr-thex-ah-na-
kseth-rehl-oo-oh-thnem-ah-reh-bah)

2 Canto a Eleggua (Song of Eleggua)

Anonymous, arr. Arlety Valdés / Yudelkis Lafuente.
Texts by anonymous.

Bara Aloyure soke wodda
Omo Ya lawana Mama Keni Irawo o e e.
Bara Suwayo o
E ke e e
Esu Odara a

Ashe Moyugba Orisha Moyugba oh
Ashe Moyugba Orisha Moyugba lle
Ashe Moyugba Orisha Eleggua lle Sokere e
Ashe Moyugba Orisha Eleggua a Eke e e e.

(Translation)
Bara Láaróyè, let our sacrifice be accepted
We are your children, don't be the last of the
initiates.
Bara, lead!
(You all) chant it
Èsù Òdàrà

So shall it be, I pay homage to the deity,
I pay homage
So shall it be, I pay homage to the deity, I pay
homage to the earth
So shall it be, I pay homage to the deity Èlégbára,
to the earth
So shall it be, I pay homage to the deity Èlégbára,
(you all) chant it!

**Translation and comments by Dr. Samuel Akinbo with assistance
from Ògbéni Nathan Lugo.*

3 Love Is...

Libby Larsen (b. 1950), text by William
Shakespeare (1564-1616), Mary Sidney
(1561-1621)

Ay me
Love is a smoke made with a fume of sighs
Being purged, a fire sparkling in lovers' eyes.
Being vexed, a sea nourished with loving tears.
What is it else?
A madness most discreet.
A choking gall,
And a preserving sweet.

4 Interlude: Marcus Aurelius to Marcus Fronto



Marcus Aurelius on Horseback (recto); Study of an Antique Vase (verso), drawing, anonymous, German, 17th century, recto (MET, 2014.127a, b).

5 Bésame Mucho (Kiss Me With Passion)

Consuelo Velázquez (1916-2005); arr. José
Galván. Texts by Consuelo Velázquez.

Bésame, bésame mucho
como si fuera esta noche la ultima vez.
Bésame, bésame mucho
que tengo miedo perderte, perderte después.

Quiero tenerte muy cerca
mirarme en tus ojos
verte junto a mi.
Pienso que tal vez mañana
yo ya estaré lejos
muy lejos de ti.

Bésame, bésame mucho
como si fuera esta noche la ultima vez.
Bésame, bésame mucho
que tengo miedo perderte, perderte después.

Kiss me now, kiss me with passion
kiss me as if this were to be our very last night.
Kiss me now, kiss me with passion
Fearing tomorrow I'll lose you past dawn's early light.

I want to hold you so closely,
look into your eyes to find
you mirroring me.
I'm sure dawn will find me lonely
cast away so far behind
where you then will be.

Kiss me now, kiss me with passion
kiss me as if this were to be our very last night.
Kiss me now, kiss me with passion
Fearing tomorrow I'll lose you past dawn's early light.

6 Interlude: Excerpt from De Profundis by Oscar Wilde



Oscar Wilde and Alfred Douglas (image); Gillman & Co - British Library: Add MS 81783 A; Wilde Douglas British Library B20147-84.jpg; May 1, 1893.

7 Figure Humaine (Human Figure): VI. Le jour m'étonne et la nuit me fait peur... (The day shocks me and the night terrifies me...)
Francis Poulenc (1899-1963), text by Paul Éluard (1895-1952)

*Le jour m'étonne et la nuit me fait peur
L'été me hante et l'hiver me poursuit*

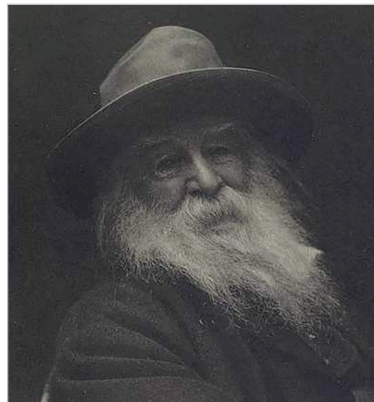
*Un animal sur la neige a posé
Ses pattes sur le sable ou dans la boue
Ses pattes venues de plus loin que mes pas
Sur une piste où la mort
A les empreintes de la vie
Le jour m'étonne et la nuit me fait peur
L'été me hante et l'hiver me poursuit*

The day shocks me and the night terrifies me.
Summer haunts me and winter chases me.
An animal has imprinted its paws
In the snow, in the sand, or in the mud.
Its paw prints have come further than my own steps.
On a path where death
Bears the imprint of life.
The day shocks me and the night terrifies me.
Summer haunts me and winter chases me.

8 A Source of Light: I. On the Shoulders of Giants
Mohammed Fairouz (b.1985). Words from a letter written by Sir Isaac Newton (1643-1727).

If I have seen further it is by standing on the shoulders of giants. I do not know what I may appear to the world, but to myself I seem to have been only like a boy playing on the seashore, and diverting myself in finding a smoother pebble or a prettier shell than ordinary, whilst the great ocean of truth lay undiscovered before me.

9 Interlude: Walt Whitman to Peter Doyle, August 21, 1869



Henry W. and Albert A. Berg Collection of English and American Literature, The New York Public Library. "Walt Whitman, Sept. '87" The New York Public Library Digital Collections.

10 We Two: IV. Not Heat Flames Up and Consumes
Steven Sametz (b. 1954), text by Walt Whitman (1819-1892)

NOT heat flames up and consumes,
Not sea-waves hurry in and out,
Not the air, delicious and dry, the air of the
ripe summer,

bears lightly along white down-balls of myriads of seeds,
Wafted, sailing gracefully, to drop where they may;
Not these—O none of these, more than the flames of me,
consuming, burning for his love whom I love!

O none, more than I, hurrying in and out:
—Does the tide hurry, seeking something, and never give up? O I the same;
O nor down-balls, nor perfumes, nor the high, rain-emitting clouds, are borne through the open air,
Any more than my Soul is borne through the open air,
Wafted in all directions, O love, for friendship, for you.

11 Light Years to Lebanon
Saunder Choi (b. 1988), text by Brian Sonia-Wallace (b. 1989)

(From Lama to Razan)

My love, you love
the mountains, they rise forever,
the sunset, with its promise
of reunion, of stars
filling the dark space
in between.

My love, you love
the smell of sumac, the light

of bakery windows inviting families
to break their fasts, as we
feed each other kisses
in the shadow
of the olive grove.

Our love forbidden, secret, aching
with a distance that defies time.
Each departure a glimmer of tears
across the expanse of sky.

Light years to Lebanon,
we keep climbing
our love a mountain
piercing the horizon
where sun and sea kiss
all the shadows away.

Light years to Lebanon
under a shared sky
burning with salt and hunger
we trek through the dark
and follow the stars.

My love, you love
the mountains, they rise forever,
the sunset, with its promise
of reunion.

Arabic text and translation (Lebanese dialect):

يا حبيبتي (ya habibti) – my dear (feminine)

السماء (assama') – the sky

النجوم (annujum) – the stars

نلتقي (nel ta'a) – we meet

سماوات داوية (samawet dawije) – light years

¹² Interlude: Emily Dickinson to Susan Gilbert, Summer 1852



Emily Dickinson; The only confirmed photograph of Emily Dickinson.
Daguerreotype. ca. 1847; <https://www.flickr.com/photos/61001351@N06/5793035401/>; Amherst College, June 3, 2011.

¹³ Before Spring

Mari Esabel Valverde (b. 1987), text by Amir
Rabiyah (b.1978)

Two lovers, splayed across the grass, light
streaked rivers
Or bones of boats caressing the water
Moaning towards the shore
Before the coming of Spring
Conjugating kisses
Mouths blessing one another's necks into wet vowels,
Pressing their hands into folds of the giving earth
Two [lovers'] bodies edges blurred by sweat
[and] a quick'ning desire lose time and let go
And the trees shake the last of the frost
Before the coming of Spring

¹⁴ 3 Sbory mužské (3 Male Partsongs), JW IV/19: I. Loučení (Parting)

Leoš Janáček (1854-1928), text by Eliška
Krásnohorská (1847-1926)

*Kdýž mne necháš pro svět, moje potěšení,
Dej mi na památku jedno políbení.
Dej mi ještě k tomu, co mé srdce zvolí,
Všecko co tě rmoutí,
Všecko co tě bolí,
Co ti jako lítost*

Na srdéčko sahá.

Dej ti pán Bůh, štěstí, ty má duše drahá!

If you will leave me for the world, my delight,
Give me, as a remembrance, one passionate kiss.
Besides that, give me what my heart chooses,
Everything that grieves you,
Everything that hurts you,
Whatever is like remorse that encroaches
Upon your dear heart.
May God give you happiness, you, my dear soul!

¹⁵ Blackbird

John Lennon (1940-1980) and Paul McCartney
(b. 1942) arr. Paris Rutherford (1934-2022)

*Due to copyright restrictions the lyrics for this track
could not be printed.*

17 We Kiss in a Shadow (from The King and I)
Richard Rodgers (1902-1979), arr. Chris Foss
(b.1983). Text by Oscar Hammerstein II
(1985-1960).

We kiss in a shadow,
We hide from the moon,
Our meetings are few,
And over too soon.

We speak in a whisper,
Afraid to be heard;

ENSEMBLE

Jacob Christopher, *tenor*
Alexander Nishibun, *tenor*
Paul Rudoi, *tenor*
Paul Scholtz, *tenor*
Rod Kelly Hines, *baritone*
Jeremy Wong, *baritone*
Samuel Bohlander-Green, *bass*
Chris Foss, *bass*

The “engaging” (*New Yorker*) low-voice ensemble Cantus is widely known for its warmth and blend, innovative programming, and riveting performances of music ranging from the

When people are near,
We speak not a word.

Alone in our secret,
Together we sigh,
For one smiling day to be free

To kiss in the sunlight
And say to the sky:
“Behold and believe what you see!
Behold how my lover loves me!”

Renaissance to the 21st century. *The Washington Post* has hailed the Cantus sound as having both “exalting finesse” and “expressive power” and refers to the “spontaneous grace” of its music-making. *The Philadelphia Inquirer* called the group nothing short of “exquisite.”

As one of the few full-time professional vocal ensembles in the United States, Cantus has grown in prominence with its distinctive approach to creating music. Working without a conductor, the members of Cantus rehearse and perform as chamber musicians, each contributing to the entirety of the artistic process, creating programs that give voice to shared human experiences.

Cantus performs more than 75 concerts each year in national and international touring, as well as in its home of Minneapolis-Saint Paul, Minnesota. The ensemble has performed at Lincoln Center,

Kennedy Center, Tanglewood, UCLA, San Francisco Performances, Atlanta’s Spivey Hall, and Bravo! Vail Valley Music Festival.



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We Kiss In A Shadow

Lyrics by Oscar Hammerstein II

Music by Richard Rodgers

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Bésame Mucho

Words and Music by Consuelo Velazquez

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