

# MUSIC ACCORD

## WILLIAM BOLCOM

### *From the Diary of Sally Hemings* (2000)

#### Program Notes

#### FROM THE DIARY OF SALLY HEMINGS Program Notes

##### WILLIAM BOLCOM

There is, of course, no such thing as a real Sally Hemings diary, at least none that anyone has found; were there a real diary, Hemings would have had ample reason to destroy it herself to protect her children's lives. The present "unofficial" diary—to use Sandra Seaton's term—exists because I asked her to write one.

When Florence Quivar asked me for a cycle on Sally Hemings I was on the point of refusing; it is such a "now" sort of topic, I feared, and I had not seen any attempts to portray her that I'd liked—it is too attractive a subject for the wrong reasons. Then I thought of Sandra, who'd become a friend because of our common interest in the black Broadway musical of 1921, *Shuffle Along*, by Eubie Blake, Noble Sissle, Aubrey Lyles, and Flournoy Miller; she is a descendant of Miller and sought me out. The dedication of the cycle, in memory of Flournoy Miller, is in gratitude for his posthumously bringing Sandra's work to my attention.

Seaton's own plays deal penetratingly with the world of the African American middle class in a refreshingly nonstereotypical way, and I felt she would understand Sally better than anyone else I knew. When she sent me the first draft I saw she had found a Sally Hemings I could believe emotionally.

Sally's world was by necessity an indoor, protected, rather quiet one, and the spareness of Sandra's language for Sally, just what I'd hoped for, is answered by a stylistic sobriety in my own music. I opted for a harmonically plain language with a somewhat French atmosphere (evoking Hemings's Paris sojourn), with African American melodic references well to the background. I did not want to fall into the expected cliché in so much work I'd seen on Sally; she was not a cardboard icon, standing for a group. In every way she was unique, an individual; otherwise how could she have fascinated someone like Jefferson for thirty-eight years.

William Bolcom

##### SANDRA SEATON

Many people have heard or read that Thomas Jefferson had a child or children with a slave he owned named Sally Hemings. There are, however, many other facts about Sally Hemings and her relationship with the third president that are not at all well-known. For example, comparatively few are aware that Sally Hemings's father, John Wayles, was also the father of Jefferson's wife Martha Wayles. Sally Hemings and Martha Wayles Jefferson were half-sisters. After the death of Martha's mother, John Wayles entered into a relationship with his housekeeper, Elizabeth Hemings, Sally's mother, a relationship that he did not try to conceal and of which Jefferson was well aware. After the death of John Wayles, Elizabeth Hemings, her young daughter Sally and the five other children of Elizabeth Hemings and John Wayles came to Monticello along with the other slaves from the Wayles estate inherited by Martha Wayles Jefferson.

After the early death of Martha, Jefferson vowed never to marry again, and he never did. Although there was a great scandal about his relationship with Sally Hemings, he was never suspected of sexual relationships with any other woman throughout his thirty-eight year intimacy with Sally. (Historians of that period and even those of the modern era offered the explanation that Jefferson had ice-water in his veins.) Jefferson refused to publicly deny his relationship with Sally Hemings, and it seems clear that he was indeed faithful to her throughout their life together. Unlike Jefferson's other slaves, none of the surviving Hemings children remained in slavery. They either left the plantation with Jefferson's tacit approval or were freed in his will. Although the relationship between Jefferson and Sally Hemings could never be a love between social and political equals, contemporary African American historian and NYU law professor Annette Gordon-Reed, one of the leading authorities on the relationship, cautions contemporary readers against assuming that any relationship between a white man and a woman legally his slave could more than power and submission. The libretto of *From the Diary of Sally Hemings* is ultimately a work of the imagination, albeit an imagination constrained by historical possibility. So far as anybody knows, the historical Sally Hemings left neither a diary nor any other writings. The words and ideas of Thomas Jefferson have been preserved in his voluminous writings but the thoughts and feelings of Sally Hemings cannot be recovered through research. The fictitious "diary entries" that form the text of the song cycle represent an attempt to give a voice to Sally Hemings by the only means available, that of imaginative re-creation.

When Bill asked whether I would consider writing the text for a song cycle about the relationship between Sally Hemings and Thomas Jefferson my first impulse, like his, was to refuse. What was there new to say? I agreed to do the work determined to present a Sally Hemings who could not be defined solely as Jefferson's mistress. The collaboration between the two of us became intensive when I gave Bill Bolcom the complete text. From that larger work Bill selected passages that would work as lyrical wholes. After he scored each composition, he would fax or mail me his score with its lyrics taken from the larger text. I would then make suggestions about words to add or leave out, and he would counter. In these interchanges I often felt as though the words of the text were being put under a magnifying glass through which their emotional associations could be seen with a new clarity. Despite his pre-eminence as a composer, Bill never emphasized the music for its own sake but always wrote to underline the meaning of the words with his notes.

My portrait of Sally Hemings is based not only on a study of the growing historical literature on Jefferson and Sally Hemings but also on my own family history. Growing up as an African American in the South before the civil rights era, I heard many family stories about relationships between blacks and whites outside the law. Some were love relationships; others were exploitive—some were probably both. A gravestone in my hometown in Tennessee describes my ancestor Anna Sanderson as the "consort" of Israel Grant, a white man. The gravestone affirming this relation to the world was put up by their child, my maternal great-great-grandfather, Cyrus Webster. The parents of my great-grandmother Emma Hatcher Webster were two teenagers, a local planter's son and the mulatto daughter of the cook-like Sally Hemings, Emma Webster was a quadroon. W. E. B. Du Bois famously identified "the problem of the twentieth century" as "the problem of the color-line," but Du Bois knew from his own family history that the line has been repeatedly broken. After Thomas Jefferson's death, the census record for the house where Sally Hemings lived with her sons identified the family as white.

The Sally Hemings dramatized in *From the Diary* is a woman who seized the opportunity to enjoy French fashion and culture, a woman whose intellect and taste were limited neither by her legal status nor racial categorization. The experience of Paris is central to my Sally Hemings. She never forgot either the freedom it promised or the wider world it offered. The Africa passed down in family stories and the Paris she lived in provides my Sally Hemings with an awareness of societies and standards beyond her own time and place. She will never accept slavery for herself or her children as natural or inevitable. She is a proud woman who refuses to join the conspiracy to ignore her "Bloodlines!"—just as her descendants continued to refuse until finally the whole world acknowledged their claims. Scholars are unsure whether the historical Sally Hemings could read or write. My own reading of the documents leads me to suspect that Sally was indeed literate; since there is incontrovertible evidence that other members of the Hemings family were, the possibility that Sally Hemings kept a diary is historically plausible. Historians have often described Sally as flighty or irresponsible based on the contemporary testimony of white observers; perhaps, however, the quality that bothered people like Abigail Adams was Sally's ability to think and reason beyond her "station."

The assumption that Sally Hemings was both literate and responsible is, in any case, a dramatic given for this song cycle. My view of Sally Hemings is based on the facts of her situation as they are known to us. It seems significant, for example, that no scholar has unearthed any rumors linking Jefferson to any other woman during the years he apparently lived with Sally Hemings. Jefferson's private life has been scrutinized by political adversaries in his own time and by scholars in our own time so closely that if there were any hint of an illicit relationship with any other woman, it would have been made known. If there were evidence that Sally Hemings had been only one of Jefferson's sexual partners among many, then one would have to look at the relationship in an

#### From the Diary of Sally Hemings

Composer: William Bolcom

Instrumentation: mezzo and piano

Premiering Artists: Florence Quivar, mezzo soprano; J.J. Penna, piano

Duration: 40'

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William Bolcom

entirely different light. Jefferson's apparent faithfulness to Sally over many years suggests that Sally Hemings was more a common-law wife than a sexual plaything. I suspect that Sally Hemings influenced Thomas Jefferson as much as he influenced her, and often enough they might have agreed to disagree. The Sally Hemings of the song cycle is a Christian not because she cannot follow Thomas Jefferson's intellectual journey to deism but because she is willing and able to disagree with Jefferson, even about ultimate matters such as religion.

If Sally Hemings was indeed a literate woman who enjoyed French fashion and culture despite her subordinate legal status, she would be by no means unique in African American history. The music of Duke Ellington, the writings of Ralph Ellison and the art of Romare Bearden—among many possible examples—provide proof, if proof were needed, that African Americans have always joined an allegiance to their own African heritage with an ability to reach out and appreciate the best of other cultures. The great writer, actor and vaudevillian Fournoy Miller, whom I am proud to claim as a relative and to whom William Bolcom generously dedicated this song cycle, also exemplified this tradition as did Noble Sissle and Eubie Blake, Fournoy Miller's partners with Aubrey Lyles in the path breaking 1921 Broadway musical *Shuffle Along*.

I remember listening to a Library of Congress recording of the reminiscences of former slaves and being impressed by their precise diction and eloquent, dignified language. As Annette Gordon-Reed has pointed out, for some Americans even today authentic black speech is typified by Prissy's despairing cry "Ah--Ah--Miss Scarlett, Ah doan know nuthin' 'bout bringin' babies," even though Margaret Mitchell's Prissy was never anything but a creature of fantasy. My portrait of Sally Hemings may be a work of the imagination, but it is no fantasy.

The portrait of Sally Hemings in *From the Diary* is meant to be suggestive rather than complete. The entries record moments rather than tell stories. The ellipses between entries leave spaces for listeners to complete the portrait for themselves; these spaces indicate my own acknowledgment that the whole truth about the relationship between Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings will never be told, either by historians or by artists. What were the "extraordinary privileges" that Madison Hemings said were granted by his father, Thomas Jefferson, to his mother, Sally Hemings? What did they mean for her everyday life? And what of the slights and insults that came her way? *From the Diary of Sally Hemings* makes no claim to provide definitive answers to such questions, nor does it attempt to use the story of the relationship between Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings to point a moral. *From the Diary* is an attempt to allow an imagined Sally Hemings to speak for herself.

The songs of *From the Diary of Sally Hemings* provide snapshots of moments throughout Sally Hemings's long association with Thomas Jefferson, from her memories as a small girl at the deathbed of Martha, Jefferson's wife and Sally's half-sister, to her thoughts as a mature woman confronting the imminence of her own death and that of Jefferson. The songs follow a roughly chronological order, focusing first on Sally's childhood, then the years in Paris where she first took Martha's place as Jefferson's wife in all but name, to their long years together when he becomes "old shoe" to her, through the scandal when news of their relationship almost destroyed Jefferson's political standing, to Sally's final reflections, in which she finds herself strong enough and proud enough of her life with Jefferson to confront Martha's ghost without shame even as she orders her children to destroy all records of her intimacy with Jefferson.

*From the Diary of Sally Hemings* is first of all a work of the imagination, not a piece of historical research. Although I have done my best to insure historical plausibility, the final test of the song cycle in concert is not the factual accuracy of the words but the human truth and emotional power of the music and words united in the performance of a gifted singer such as Alyson Cambridge. I have, nevertheless, made every effort to insure historical plausibility throughout the cycle. Almost all the words spoken by Thomas Jefferson in the song cycle are indeed among the written words of the historical Thomas Jefferson, the third president of the United States. The words quoted in the second song can be seen today on Martha Jefferson's gravestone, carved into it at the order of her inconsolable husband: *If in the house of Hades, men forget their dead, yet will I remember by dear companion* The fragmentary

description of Jefferson's own gravesite in Song XVIII was written by Jefferson himself as he envisioned his ideal resting place, where there would be: "No sound to break the stillness but a brook" and the only light would be "the feeble ray of a half-extinguished lamp." The references to plants, such as the blooming "Purple hyacinth" and "narcissus" of Song X, the "wild honeysuckle" of Song XII, as well as the sad news that "severe weather has killed most of the fruit" in Song XVI and "Hyacinth and Narcissus gone" in Song XVII, are taken directly from Jefferson's own *Garden Book*, where he kept meticulous records of all the crops and plants cultivated at Monticello. Sometimes I have taken Jefferson's words from one context and put them in another. In Song VIII one inducement he offers to Sally to return to Monticello with him is the promise of so much leisure that she will have time to copy lines from *Tristram Shandy*, Lawrence Sterne's sentimental, comic, slightly bawdy novel. Jefferson actually made the suggestion not to Sally but to Martha and in a letter, not in conversation. In Song XI he holds Sally close and declares "the earth belongs to the living." That assertion is taken from a letter to James Madison where the context is political rather than personal. The Madame d'Étoiles mentioned in song XIV is better known today as Madame de Pompadour, and she was indeed an influential political figure in the last days of the old regime in France.

Although I sought to be as accurate as possible in all historical references, the song cycle is first of all a work of art for which factual accuracy is not as important as imaginative truth. This concert will, I hope, encourage its audience to see Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings in a new way, but even more importantly, I hope my words and William Bolcom's music brought to life by the magnificent talent and skill of soprano Alyson Cambridge and pianist Lydia Brown will, through the magic of art, lead us to see ourselves in a new way.

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## About Music Accord

Comprised of top classical music presenting organizations throughout the United States, Music Accord is a consortium that commission new works in the chamber music, instrumental recital and song genres. The Consortium's goal is to create a significant number of new works and to ensure presentation of these works in venues throughout this country and, if the occasion arises, internationally. Music Accord awards commissions principally to performers who are US citizens or reside in the US and assists these performers in selecting composers who are United States citizens or who reside in the United States.

