



## SPEAK: Two Artists' Reflection on A Poet's Love

by Joanna Haigood

with José Joaquín García

**"... the angry, bitter dreams, let us now bury them... throw [them] in the sea... I will also put my love and my suffering into it."**

**-The 16th song in *Schumann's Dichterliebe***

**"A Poet's Love"**

I grew up with parents who took a tremendous risk by falling in love. My father was a black man from South Carolina, my mother a white woman from Bavaria, Germany. They were both born in the 1920s and had suffered significant horrors during their early lives related to hatred of "the other." After marrying in Germany and then spending years on military tours around the world, my parents settled with their three children in the United States. It was the 1960s, when our family's very existence challenged the social norms of the day. It disrupted the notion that love should not and could not transcend race. A black and white mixed-race family living in the post-WWII era demanded that love (or lack thereof) between people and countries be re-evaluated, re-conceptualized and re-imagined.

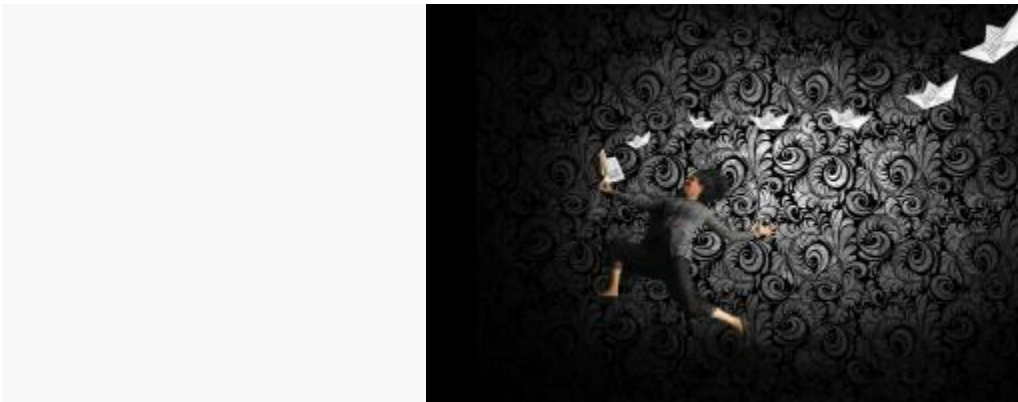


Photo by Charline Formenty

Throughout my childhood and throughout my life I have questioned why we hate based on superficial and insignificant differences. As we bear witness to a constant onslaught of wars and mounting crimes against humanity, all motivated by issues like race, religion, sex, tribe, etc., I wonder how our survival can be assured; if love might be a viable and sustainable, personal, social, political, and global assurance. Might it be a *real* solution? Dozens of songs have been written about it, sermons have been preached about it,

powerful social media campaigns have promoted it—love as an agent of social and political change. But it remains a cry of a few and an active practice of perhaps fewer. In recent years I've become fascinated by love stories of all kinds—romances, friendships, love for the planet, love within families. I have begun what I am considering a canon of works based on this exploration, the first was inspired by Ann Hamilton's *Tower* at Oliver Ranch, and now Schumann's *Dichterliebe*, in collaboration with my dear colleague and friend, José Joaquín García, who stands unwavering, centered in (a poet's) love. José introduced me to Schumann's *Dichterliebe* shortly after we met at Camp Winnarainbow (a circus and performing arts camp in California) a few years ago. *Dichterliebe* is Schumann's lush and moving song cycle set to the poetry of Heinrich Heine. José shared that he'd always wanted to perform these songs, which he'd loved since he was a teenager. At camp we worked on three of the songs together—I danced in the air while José sang. We decided to find a way to realize the entire work.



Photo courtesy of Joanna Haigood

Not unlike my parents, José has also acted with some level of defiance. As a New York Puerto Rican who was classically trained in voice, he maneuvered through the stereotypes that Puerto Ricans were not qualified to sing in this tradition. That people of color couldn't or shouldn't perform Shakespeare, sing opera, dance ballet, participate in other forms of artistic or intellectual merit outside their own culture, is a sadly familiar narrative in this country. (American Ballet Theater *just recently* named their first African American female soloist, almost 50 years after the end of the civil rights movement). For José however, sociocultural differences and divisions were of no import; Schumann's work resonated deeply. The songs speak to an experience that is universal. Now, sitting in the center of our creative process, I wonder if it is possible to create a new world reality based on an emotion and a practice that is as ancient as civilization itself.

### **My Partner Speaks**

I was born in New York's Lower east side, the son of Puerto Rican parents. Dancing to music was central to my upbringing. My mother played loud *Gran Combo* while cleaning the railroad apartment we lived in.

She would always manage to grab one of us, usually me, pick me up, hold me tight to her bosom and dance Puerto Rican salsa with absolute grace. I felt the music in my soul. I could not keep still, I had to dance.

At P.S.15 (my elementary school) whenever bad weather permitted us to stay inside, we were assembled in the auditorium... and danced! We danced to James Brown, Jackson 5 and The 3 Dog Night. I felt the music in my soul. My feet moved and my body swayed as if by the powers of *Chango* (the Santeria orisha of thunder). I recall when the assistant principal told me to translate to my mom in Spanish that I was the best dancer in school. My mom smiled and I believed her. I remember my 6th grade teacher, Ms. Yantsee, forcing me to sing *row, row, row your boat, gently down the stream...* and afterward, her saying that I had a nice voice and should do something with it. I believed her, too. I soon went to a middle school with a voice program, focused on my craft and followed my destiny, which led me out of the ghetto and into LaGuardia Music and Art High School (a.k.a. the “Fame” school). There I met my first black teacher, Ms. Gloria Lee. My life would never be the same. She instilled in me a love for the craft of singing that remains to this day. While at Music and Art, I also discovered and fell in love with Italian art songs and German *lieder* and in particular, became lovingly obsessed with Schumann’s *Dichterliebe*. I dreamt that I would not only perform the entire 16 cycles but would somehow merge the song with dance. Luck would have it that I met Joanna Haigood at Camp Winnarainbow, where I was a Performing Arts Coordinator, and she was a guest artist. After many conversations and sharing, Joanna was equally excited about the prospect of digging in and exploring this idea of love in our lives and in our society. I also made it clear that in whatever we created together, I wanted to dance. I wanted to move.



Photo courtesy of José Joaquín García

More significantly, I want to explore through song and movement, the desire to love *while* maneuvering the daily obstacles of the occupying police force, drug dealers and the constant threat of violence, which has shaped the man and artist I am today. When and where do these intersect? How do they shape us? How might it look for the power of love to win over the power of hate? As our vision and version of A

*Poet's Love* unfolds, we shall sonically, physically, and boldly enter the places where love, hate and *Chango* might take us.