

**Summum Bonum** (The Highest Good) is an interpretive setting of a Robert Browning poem of the same title. To me the poem is not so much about romanticism as it is about truth. All of the parts are quasi-improvisatory, with the vocal part devoted to the vowels, and the instrumental parts thought of as providing the solidity of consonants. So, turning the setting to vocalise is I think that an extension of Browning's aesthetic in the poem – that beyond words lies ecstatic, wordless praise.

– Charleston/New York  
May, 1994

### **Summum Bonum**

All the breath and the bloom of the year in the bag of one bee:  
All the wonder and wealth of the mine in the heart of one gem:  
In the core of one pearl all the shade and the shine of the sea:  
Breath and bloom, shade and shine, wonder, wealth, and – how far above them –  
Truth, that's brighter than gem,  
Trust, that's purer than pearl, –  
Brightest truth, purest trust in the universe – all were for me  
In the kiss of one girl

Robert Browning

## Summum Bonum performance notes

- All instrumental parts proceed independently without coordination of meter, pulse, or barlines, sharing the same pitch and phrase material. A value of ~60 to the quarter note should be observed freely with rubato, but never significantly faster or slower.
- Instruments begin one at a time, from low to hi, at intervals of about 30 seconds, letting the texture develop slowly. The singer may begin after all instruments are in, the texture has been developed and she hears her entrance.
- Instruments *are free to select phrase material and systems in any order*, but should ensure that one player is always playing a sustained B-flat. One should cultivate one's part by listening to the texture, striving for florid harmony, and supporting but never overwhelming the singer.
- Instruments continue for about one minute after the singer has finished, slowly fading in volume and texture, ending in reverse order of start (lowest instrument should be the last to stop).
- Repeats for all musicians are always optional, may be any number of times or none at all, and may return to the middle or the beginning of a given system. Fermati are of variable duration and are to help avoid a sense of regular and monotonous pulse.
- Breath marks and slurs between phrases are optional and may extend across repeat signs and systems. Tones are played legato; volume is comfortably soft but variations in volume and crescendo/diminuendi are possible given the space and the balance with the singer. You thus are encouraged to create larger phrases through your own sensibility and ear.
- Instruments may transpose octaves freely, but changes of octave should occur at breaths between phrases (a given phrase pattern should stay within the written pitch relationship of one octave).
- For the singer only, the following also applies: the given pitches are not the only possible ones. Your ear and voice may discover more beautiful, appropriate, and comfortable variations and possibilities.
- If there is such an emotion as relaxed and reverent passion, that is the emotion to find when developing this music.