

Vox Program Notes
Winter 2025
Banned!

"You have to read, you have to know, you have to have access to knowledge."

Toni Morrison

Tonight's concert gives voice to works of literature that have been ignored, ostracized, or suppressed through institutional acts of censorship. Through music, we perform the memory of these writers and the words and worlds created for us, books and poems and plays that encompass a range of experiences that are alternately beautiful, resistant, melancholic, angry, and triumphant.

William Shakespeare, *The Merry Wives of Windsor* and *The Merchant of Venice*

Shakespeare dealt with constantly shifting censorship policies during his career; his plays were subject to constant scrutiny and he had to carefully toe the line of political criticism. Censorship of his plays continued on after his death, with perhaps the most famous incident being the Bowdler "family friendly" edition of Shakespeare plays in the early 19th century (which gave rise to the verb "bowdlerize" – to purge vulgar content in absurd or ineffective ways). *The Merry Wives of Windsor* is a bawdy comedy that ultimately turns toxic masculinity on its head, as the merry wives outsmart the scheming Falstaff. "Fie! Fie! Fie!" was a song performed by children dressed as fairies sent by the wives to pinch and scold Falstaff. Stephen Bouma's setting of this song emphasizes their righteous fury and determination with its declamatory repetition of its curse: "Fie! Fie! Fie!"

The history of American censorship of Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice* begins in the early years of the 20th century, where school boards across America were requested to remove the play from curriculums because of anti-Semitic content. Some teachers were forbidden to teach the play altogether, others were allowed as long as they never mentioned the controversial central character, Shylock! Paul Caldwell and Sean Ivory's "Fancy" sets a song from the play, "Tell me where is fancy bred," which takes place in a tense moment as a reminder to avoid making judgments according to external appearance. The sprightly rhythms maintained by the piano and violin help portray a sense of hope despite the tension and urgency. Robert H. Young's setting of "How Sweet the Moonlight Sleeps" musically illustrates the beautiful words uttered by Lorenzo, the man who marries Shylock's daughter. It is a piece of music about music: the melodic lines imitate the listener apprehending music arching across the night, louder here, softer there, and the ear must work harder to hear the strains.

Anne Frank, *The Diary of a Young Girl*

According to the American Library Association, *The Diary of a Young Girl* by Anne Frank has been challenged or banned several times since they started tracking bans in 1990, and most of

the complaints center around passages regarding her emergent sense of sexuality. Anne Frank's diary provides an invaluable portrait of the becoming of a young woman, hiding for two years with her family during the horror of the Nazi occupation of the Netherlands. *Anne Frank: A Living Voice* is a haunting setting of her words by Linda Tutas Haugen. "It Is The Silence" reflects upon the horror of knowing terrible things are happening outside as she waits in the silence of her hiding place. "Sunshine and Cloudless Sky" describes a morning in the attic with her quiet friend Peter, giving thanks for beauty of the nature outside their window. The music begins with a recitative-like section, which takes on more motion as the friends contemplate the outdoors – arriving at a moment of stasis as they breathe in the air.

Amanda Lovelace, "a survival plan of sorts"

For American poet Amanda Lovelace, poetry is a medium of revolution and freedom for women. "a survival plan of sorts" draws our attention to the power of words, and the deeper the shelves, the more honed our powers become. Melissa Dunphy writes amorphous, shifting harmonies for the opening of this piece as a thoughtful meditation, with the occasional clarion of encouragement to "raid your library." This perusal of words and thoughts then takes a clearer shape – "collect words and polish them up" – as we learn to use the words as tools to transmit meaning. We return to the meditation again, as if to remind us that our reading work should never come to an end.

Margaret Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale*

VOX Femina commissioned Jennifer Lucy Cook to write this piece based on Margaret Atwood's frequently banned book *The Handmaid's Tale*. In her notes on her composing process, Cook reflected on the prophetic aspects of the censorship of this book: "This is a truly ironic act given that the book is a dystopian story of censorship and extreme oppression. Its themes of corrupt government, religious extremes, and the controlling of women are unfortunately as relevant as ever, and it was therapeutic for me to process this relevance through music. After rereading the novel and feeling the eerie similarities with many echoes in our contemporary society, I found great comfort in envisioning singing about these from within the safety of a choir, with multiple souls musically holding each other while experiencing the emotions."

Cook writes about the first movement: "*Once I Could Read* contains a tempo marking that reads: "pragmatic and melancholy; not overly sentimental," and this sums up my approach to this movement about freedoms lost. There's a certain numbness that we use as a coping mechanism when we are not operating as full, unburdened people. I chose to express this numbness through homophonic hymnlike textures as the singers enumerate what once was, while the piano keeps time and rhythm underneath...Of course, like the very banning of *Handmaid's Tale* itself, these happy memories become progressively more and more censored as the piece continues...I find a strange excitement and comfort in feeling deeply as an act of resistance, and with any luck, this piece might offer us all the encouragement to acknowledge our emotions as a bold, positive reaction to outside forces."

Of the second movement, *My Body and Me*, Cook writes: “This profound disconnect between the body and the self is fascinating to me, and is what I attempted to explore by creating an antiphonal choir...Disassociation as a trauma response is depicted in the way two choirs never quite agree on who has the melody, what the proper harmonic phrase resolutions ought to be, or whether the body or soul has more power. There is no clear outcome of this tug-of-war, but a few moments of unison and homophony serve as a reminder that the two halves were once whole...”

And finally, in *Ahead*: “This movement accelerates like a runner with the finish-line in sight, complete with gasps for life-giving breath. Throughout the piece are moments of quiet questioning, when we anxiously grasp for any semblance of stability. But, any plans, assurances, or answers are unknowable, and what is most important is simply to escape. The ray of light at the end of the movement is the realization that hope can guide us, even when we’re not sure what we’re even hoping for. We are simply moving toward something new. ‘What’s left? Hope, ahead.’”

Toni Morrison, *Beloved*

The books by Pulitzer and Nobel Prize winning author Toni Morrison are among the most frequently challenged and banned in America. During her lifetime, she fought against censorship, and advocated for libraries and open access to books. Her 1987 novel *Beloved* is a fearless reflection on slavery. Composer Maria A. Ellis based “It Was You” on the happiness that the characters must learn to choose for themselves. This self-actualization is hard-won through explorations of trauma, and Ellis draws upon the determined sounds of Gospel Swing to portray the victory of devotion.

Lewis Carroll, *Alice in Wonderland*

Lewis Carroll’s *Alice in Wonderland* has been banned all over the world for many reasons: in America for language, sexual content, drug references; in China for animals being placed “on the same level as humans” – and generally for its subversiveness in rendering a magical world that is satirically topsy-turvy and undermining, reflecting our own world in a distorted mirror. In her work *Wonderland*, Andrea Ramsey captures this marriage of whimsy with critique in snippets spoken from experience by various characters: Alice, the Duchess, Eaglet, and the Dodo.

Juno Dawson, *This Book is Gay*

While writing this nonfiction guidebook for LGBT teens, Dawson said she often found herself thinking about what she would have wanted to know as a teen, what information might have helped her in those formative years. Amy Burgess based “Wondering” on the complexities of identity and self-actualization, starting with a measured determination that transforms into a driving, rhythmic flurry of possibilities. Ultimately, Burgess leans into a celebration of the

discovery of community -- “You’re part of something bigger now” – and the freedom that comes with being who we are.

Alex Gino, *Melissa*

Melissa is a children’s novel about a young trans girl and the challenges and support she experiences as she expresses her identity. Michael Bussewitz-Quarm and Shantel Sellers based “Melissa, unSilenced” on the narrative of the book, focusing on the thoughts of young Melissa and the allyship shown to her by her best friend. The piece enacts a musical journey through anxiety, sadness, acceptance, and joy.

Alice Walker, *The Color Purple*

Alice Walker’s 1982 novel *The Color Purple* was adapted into a musical in 2005 with music and lyrics by Allee Willis, Brenda Russell, and Stephen Bray. This arrangement is a version of the title song that reprises at the end of the show, where Celie is reunited with her children and her sister, surrounded by community. Celie sings in healing and hope, with those who care for her responding to her in support.

Lesléa Newman, *Heather Has Two Mommies*

Lesléa Newman’s 1989 children’s book *Heather Has Two Mommies* was one of the first LGBTQIA+ children’s books to receive significant public attention. Ann Hampton Callway wrote “Heather’s Dream” from young Heather’s perspective, as if she is responding to the censorship to her story. Heather leads the song, as the choir joyfully backs her up with a united message: that families look different from each other, but are united in love.

Stephen Sondheim, *Into the Woods*

On its surface, Stephen Sondheim’s musical *Into the Woods* (1987) is a show about what happens *after* happily ever after, which in itself is already an unexpected treatment of the fairy tale characters that populate the story. Traditionally, fairy tales convey moral lessons and consequences for children, but in this musical Sondheim shows that the lessons imparted are just as much for the adults. The 2014 Disney film adaptation of this musical excised some parts of the narrative in the name of “family friendliness” – taking some of the bite out of the lessons for the grown-ups. In “Children Will Listen”, we confront the consequences of actions made in the previous generation and are reminded of the responsibility we have to our legacy. We are reminded that the precocious eyes and ears of children see, hear, and understand more than we realize, and since we are not alone in the world and our actions will affect others, we must be responsible for our choices and for our words – and be honest with our children.

This responsibility to honesty and truth is at the core of anti-censorship work. In her 2009 collection *Burn This Book*, Toni Morrison makes her thoughts on acts of censorship clear, and gives writers a charge to fulfill:

“The thought that leads me to contemplate with dread the erasure of other voices, of unwritten novels, poems whispered or swallowed for fear of being overhead by the wrong people, outlawed languages flourishing underground, essayists’ questions challenging authority never being posed, unstaged plays, cancelled films – that thought is a nightmare. As though a whole universe is being described in invisible ink. Certain kinds of trauma visited on peoples are so deep, so cruel, that unlike money, unlike vengeance, even unlike justice, or rights, or the goodwill of others, only writers can translate such trauma and turn sorrow into meaning, sharpening the moral imagination.”