

# I CAN'T HELP MYSELF

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~ POLY-TEXT SONG FOR SOPRANO & PIANO ~

MUSIC BY:  
**JORDAN ALEXANDER KEY**

TEXT BY:  
**CATHERINE MWITTA**

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**JORDAN ALEXANDER KEY**

[jordanalexanderkey@gmail.com](mailto:jordanalexanderkey@gmail.com)  
<https://www.jordanalexanderkey.com/>  
(540) 588-2409

**CATHERINE MWITTA**

[mwittacatherine@gmail.com](mailto:mwittacatherine@gmail.com)  
(604) 725-2289

Written for the 2022 (Art) Song Lab  
Of Vancouver Canada

- premiered by -

soprano

Robyn Driedger-Klassen

pianist

Karen Lee-Morlang

## I Can't Help Myself

Poly-text poem by Catherine Mwitta

Oh, I've fucked up again,  
I've hurt you once more.  
acid tears of regret burn my cheeks,  
there's a hushed discontent from the divine.  
I'm human; hence I'm flawed,  
nobody's worse than me.  
Tortured souls are the immortally damned,  
misunderstood and villainized;  
you never gave me a chance.  
I'm sorry! I'm so sorry! I can't help myself!  
Shame: poison which breaks the heart.

Oh, it feels so good to be bad,  
I've hurt you once more .  
the whimper out your mouth a delight,  
downturned jut of your lips delicious.  
I'm human; hence I'm incorrigible,  
nobody's worse than me.  
Unfettered evil consumes all,  
influences the gullible  
and eats the weak for brunch.  
I'm mean! I'm so mean! I can't help myself!  
Broken hearts mend my own.

## Program Note

Written in collaboration with poet Catherine Mwitta, this piece was commissioned by Vancouver (Art) Song Lab during the Spring and Summer of 2022. The poem by Catherine is a polytextual poem, presenting two sides of a dysfunctional relationship via two hypothetically simultaneous poetic presentations. The tradition of setting poly-texts stretches back to the Middle Ages during the 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> century, during which time composer would often select two to three differing texts, which would be presented by the same number of voices. Thus, traditionally, a poly-text piece would include multiple singers presenting different poems, the interlocking of which might create an additional "hidden" poem or create a new and perhaps unexpected juxtaposition of typically juxtaposed feelings, such as lust and sacrosanctity in the case of a courtly love poem being sung along side a devotional poem to the Virgin Mary.

The two poems presented herein contrast each other in many moods: the first perhaps distressed, regretful, self-loathing, and angry while the second perhaps loathing, abusive, manipulative, contemptuous, and self-worshipping. Given these two paralleled yet, at times, highly contrasting voices, the materials of the music and the soprano's song itself rapidly shifts between different sounds, speeds, moods, and timbres: singing, shouting, and speaking in all sorts of moods and inflections as directed by the music and/or designed by the theatric singer. Consequently, the singer must be highly flexible and very dramatically includes to perform this piece well. They must shift rapidly between registers and singing styles, changing facial expressions and speaking/shouting/singing tone frequently and to the point of seeming schizophrenia. The work is wild and frequently visceral; a battle of two within the body of one.

# Performance Notes

## Notes to the Soprano:

Range: G3 to B5 – outer ranges are not lyrical

### General Remarks:

As indicated in the program note, your part is highly dramatic and expressive to the point of apparent schizophrenia. At times throughout the work, emotional/mood suggestions are given with your part to help suggest the inflection and physical expression (i.e. facial and other body gestures) of your performance. You are at your liberty to reinterpret the suggestions as you like within tasteful parameters and consideration of the text itself. It is essential for a good performance, however, that you take upon yourself two simultaneous characters and make them distinct in your performance.

I have done some work to help distinguish the voices via range (medium to high range the first poetic voice in black, and low to medium range for the second poetic voice in red) as well as via technique (i.e. the first voices is more often lyrical while the second is less frequently lyrical and more often in sprechstimme or other pseudo-sung techniques). In addition to the musical/compositional considerations for the distinction of the characters, I have also notated the music with black and red text to reflect the alternation of the chanters. When you see typical black text, you are singing the first poem; red text indicates the second voice.

### Techniques:

- Vocal Techniques:
  1. Vocal Fry transitioning via a rising gliss to a normal pitch (F# 5 in most cases)
  2. Sprechstimme notated as is traditional and performed as is traditional as well as in accordance with any other indicated or decided upon emotional inflections.
  3. Spoken Text often spoken in accordance with any other indicated or decided upon emotional inflections.
  4. “Shouting” Pitch, which is performed a bit like sprechstimme, but with more force, usually in registral extremes (low or high). When such notes heads are given, the singer should be the most dramatic with these notes, giving the most emphatic and extreme emotional display (emotion may vary depending on context and notated suggestions). The pitch of these notes can be approximate.

1. (first in m. 2)      2. (first in m. 7)      3. (first in m. 9)      4. (first in m. 12)

gliss.

Spoken to one's self.

The image shows four musical examples on a single staff. Example 1 shows a glissando from a low note to a higher one. Example 2 shows a series of notes with 'x' marks above them, indicating a specific technique. Example 3 is labeled 'Spoken to one's self.' and shows a series of notes. Example 4 shows a series of notes with a different inflection.

## **Notes to the Pianist:**

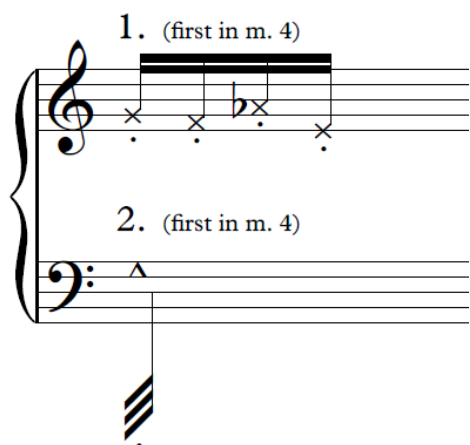
Range: entire gamut of the piano keyboard with additional interior techniques (see below)

### General Remarks:

As indicated in the program note, the soprano's part is highly dramatic and expressive to the point of apparent schizophrenia. The pianist's part reflects and compliments the eccentricity of the soprano's part; thus, you will find that you are often changing between various tempos and styles of playing depending on the text/character of the moment.

### Techniques:

1. Mute the strings with the right hand well behind the dampers and near the bridge that leads to the pins. The left hand is left to play the indicated music on the keyboard.
2. Percussive low cluster of notes on the keyboard with the left hand. The set of keys needs not be the same every time. The pianist is at their discretion to select a nice cluster, which might change given the context of the surrounding music and singing. Generally, these percussive smacks should be un-sustained and as drum-like as possible. Different pianos will allow for more unassisted sustain in the lower register of the piano. Ideally, the piano should allow for little to no unassisted sustain in the lower register.



## **Additional Performance Notes:**

### Fermatas:

There are three different kinds of fermatas in this piece: angular, rounded, and boxed. The length of the pause or hold is suggested by these different shapes.

- The angular fermata should be relatively the shortest fermata
- The rounded (traditional) fermata should be somewhere between a short pause and a long pause
- The boxed fermata is for a longer pause or sustain.

The exact lengths of these fermatas are not given and are up to the discretion of the performers based on the performance space and their own taste. No fermata should feel awkwardly long.

# I Can't Help Myself

On the eponymous text by Catherine Mwitta

Jordan Alexander Key  
Spring, 2022

Without Time, Accelerating (♩ < 40)

Soprano

Piano

*pp*

PED.

2 *pp*  
vocal fry transforming to pitch

Oh,

*gliss.*

*p* *f*

3 *mf*

shouting, frustrated  
approximate pitch

Enchanted (♩ = 50)

RAH!

*p*

perceptive low cluster on  
the keyboard with left hand.

2

5 *mp* *choked, strained* *mf* *sinister, wicked of a distinctly different character.*

Oh, I've fucked up. fucked up a - gain It feels so

8 *good.* Spoken to one's self. "I've fucked up again."

10 *Dreamlike* (♩ = 50) *mf* *with urgency*

*Dreamlike* (♩ = 50) I've fucked up a -

*mp cresc.*

11

gain.

12

*f* more like shouting than singing,  
approximate pitch.

I've hurt you once more.

*ff* \*

13

**A** Fevered (♩ = 60)

4/4

**A** Fevered (♩ = 60)

4/4

suddenly quiet

*ff*



15

*ff*  
*panicked*

I've hurt

you

16

*self-satisfied*

*f*

I've

hurt

you

once more

18

*choked, strained*  
*mp*

*mf*

ac - id tears

of re - gret

20

*mf* with pleasure, but sinister, sprechstimme

*spoken in time, with delight and a bit of forcefulness*

5

Vocal line for measures 20-22. The melody starts with a half rest, followed by a quarter note G4, a quarter note A4, and a quarter note B4. There are several accidentals and dynamics markings throughout the line.

burn my cheeks.

the whim - per out your mouth

a de-light.

Piano accompaniment for measures 20-22. The right hand features a complex rhythmic pattern with many accidentals. The left hand has a simpler bass line with some accidentals. A 'PED.' marking is present at the bottom.

23

**B**

Enchanted (♩ = 60)

*mp religioso, molto dolce*

Vocal line for measures 23-24. It begins with a 4/4 time signature and a half rest. The melody then consists of quarter notes G4, A4, and B4, followed by a half note C5 with a sharp sign.

There is a hushed

**B**

Enchanted (♩ = 60)

Piano accompaniment for measures 23-24. The right hand has a series of chords, some with accidentals. The left hand has a bass line with chords and accidentals. A 'pp' dynamic marking is present, and a 'PED.' marking is at the bottom.

25

Vocal line for measures 25-26. It starts with a 4/4 time signature and a half rest. The melody includes quarter notes G4, A4, B4, and C5, with a triplet of quarter notes G4, A4, B4. There are accidentals and a 'p' dynamic marking.

dis - con - tent

from the di - vine.

Piano accompaniment for measures 25-26. The right hand has chords and a triplet of quarter notes. The left hand has a bass line with chords and accidentals.

6 28 **C** Fevered (♩ = 140)

*f*  
*wicked, snarling*

down turned jut of your lip

31 *mp*  
*sinisterly*  
*Spoken*

*ff*

"delicious" It feels so good to be bad.

35

*f*

It

38

*ff*

*shouting*

feels so good to be bad.

41

**D**

Enchanted (♩ = 60)

*mp religioso, molto dolce*

I'm hu - man, I'm hu - man,

*pp*

PED.

44

*molto rit.*

hence I'm flawed.

*pp*

*molto rit.*

8 **Fevered** (♩ = 140)

46 **E** *f*  
*with anger, an argument*

**Fevered** (♩ = 140) I'm hu - man, I'm hu - man

49

hence I'm

51

flawed, flawed, flawed, flawed, flawed. I'm hu - man, hence I'm\_

53

*mf*

spoken, with self-satisfaction

incorrigible

Musical score for measures 53-56. The vocal line consists of a long rest. The piano accompaniment features a dynamic marking of *mp* and includes various rhythmic patterns and accidentals.

57

**F**

*without vib.*

*mf*

*f* almost shouting

Oh - - - rahhh!

Musical score for measures 57-59. The vocal line includes the lyrics "Oh - - - rahhh!". The piano accompaniment features dynamic markings of *sfz*, *mf*, and *f*.

60

*with rage*

*mf*

*shouting*

*f*

*manic, with self-loathing*

Oh - - - - - rahhh! No - bo - dy's

Musical score for measures 60-62. The vocal line includes the lyrics "Oh - - - - - rahhh! No - bo - dy's". The piano accompaniment features a dynamic marking of *ff*.

62

*seemingly insane*

worse than me.

No - bo - dy's worse than me!

No - one's

64

worse than me!

No - bo - dy's worse than me, me, me, ME!

66

*with insanity*  
*mp*

*f*

*ff*

No, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, No-bo - dy's worse than me!

69 **G** *ff*

Tor - tured, tor - tured... Un - fet - tered e - vil con - sumes all!

**G** *f* *mf* *f*

*p*  $8^{va}$

72

Un - fet - tered e - vil con - sumes all!

*f*

(8)

*f*

74

Tor - tured! Tor - tured!

*f*



12 *mf* *mp* *ff* (upper note if possible)

76

5 7 2

8b 8b 4

Un - fet - tered, un - fet - tered, un - fet - tered, un - fet - tered, E - VII

*mp* *mp* *f*

79 *poco rit.*

*mf* *pp*

8<sup>va</sup>

83 **H** Enchanted (♩ = 60) *mp* as before, but with some urgency, mournful

4 4

Tor - tured souls are the

**H** Enchanted (♩ = 60)

4 4 *pp*

4 4

PED.

85

im mor - tal - ly damned, \_\_\_\_\_ mis-un-der-stood \_\_\_\_\_ and vil-lain ized; you

88

**molto rit.**

\_\_\_\_\_ ne - ver \_\_\_\_\_ gave me a chance.

**molto rit.**

*pp*

90

**I** Pondersome, but with some haste (♩ = 60)

Tor - tured, tor - tured, tor - tured...

**I** Pondersome, but with some haste (♩ = 60)

*mp*

14

**accel.**

93

*with sinister glee, growing deranged*

*mp*

Un - fet - tered e - vil con - sumes all, in - flu - en - ces

**accel.**

*mp*

97

*mf*

the gul - li - ble and eats the weak, and eats, and eats, and eats, and eats,

*mf*

101

*f*

*ff*

*mf*

spoken wikedly

and eats, and eats, and eats, and eats, and eats the weak for brunch

105 **J Fevered** (♩ = 120) *mf* *vocal fry transforming to pitch* *ff* 15

Oh, A - cid tears

*gliss.*

**J Fevered** (♩ = 120)

*ff*

108 burn my cheek!

*f manic, insane*

It feels so good to be bad!

10 8 10 8 10 8

111

*demonic* *with anxiety* *with happiness*

It feels so good to be bad! Oh I've fucked up. It feels so good.

PED.

16 113 *with fear* *purely evil* *ff*

I have hurt you. It feels so good to be bad!

115

Oh, —

117 *entranced schizophrenia*

it feels so good, it feels so good, it feels so good to be

PED.

Freely (♩ = ca. 50)

119 *ff* *accel.* 17

*bad!*

Freely (♩ = ca. 50)

Solo, Cadenza

*accel.*

*p cresc.* \*

Pulling Back, Building (♩ = ca. 40)

121

*ped. pp cresc.*

*accel.*

123

125

18  
127

3/4

*As fast as possible while being clear.*

128 ♩ = 60

*f* 3

129

*f* 3 *ff*

130

*mf* \*

# K

Ecstatic, Mad (♩ = 60)

131

vocal fry transitioning to pitch

wild schizophrenia, erratic emotions

gliss.

3/4

16

I

3/4

# K

Ecstatic, Mad (♩ = 60)

ff

2/4

3/4

16

3/4

3/4

PED.

133

can't help my - self, I can't help my

3/4

3/4

3/4

3/4

134

self. I'm mean, I'm so mean,

3/4

3/4



135

so mean. I'm sor - ry. I'm so mean.

136

So sor - -

137

ry!

Ah, *fff*

138

Shame, poi - son which breaks the heart!

This system contains measures 138 through 143. The vocal line consists of a series of eighth notes with accents, starting on a G4 and moving up stepwise to a D5. The piano accompaniment features a steady eighth-note bass line in the left hand and chords in the right hand, primarily using the first three fingers.

139

*terrifyingly wicked*  
*fff*

Bro - ken hearts \_\_\_\_\_ mend my \_\_\_\_\_ own.

This system contains measures 139 through 144. The vocal line begins with a half note on G4, followed by a melodic phrase with a slur and accents. The piano accompaniment includes a complex bass line with triplets and a final measure with a large fermata over a chord. The lyrics are in red.

\*