An art song is a genre of classical music traditionally written for piano and voice while setting the text of a poem. The art song has long been considered by scholars to be a look into the cultural and historical context of its originating country; extensive research has been done on the settings of Goethe by Schubert and Schumann (German lied) or the settings of Verlaine by Debussy and Fauré (French chanson). However, the contemporary American art song lacks the same attention. The Natural Association of Teachers of Singing features a competition every year dedicated to the performance of art song and requires singers to perform at least one selection in English, and it also features a separate competition for the composition of the contemporary art song. However, despite the growing interest in the survival and development of the American art song, the most recent books in the Northwestern music library whose focus is the research and identity of American song refer to ‘contemporary’ as the 1970s or 80s; while research has been done on Charles Ives and Aaron Copland and their settings of Emily Dickinson, little research extends beyond the middle of the 20th century. For eight weeks, inspired by the research which has already been done on centuries-old art song in Germany and France, I will spearhead an interdisciplinary study of contemporary American song by focusing on text settings of perhaps the greatest and most accessible American avant-garde poet, e.e. cummings, in order to develop an understanding of this underresearched music and its place in music history as a representative of American culture, art, and performance practice. In hopes of making a career in the performance of this repertoire, it is particularly important to me not only to have a concrete understanding of American musical aesthetics and performance practices, but also to encourage the study and performance of these works on a broader scale.

e.e. cummings is widely recognized as one of the most influential American poets of all time. His works are the most effective to “ever [make] avant-garde, experimental poems so attractive to the general and the specific reader,” says Randall Jarrell’s The Third Book of Criticism. In particular, his use of white space, reimagining of the functions and spellings of words, and implementation of diverse and often grammatically misused punctuation characterize his work (Fairley 2). Being equally one of the most influential, original, and accessible poets of his country and generation, it makes sense that contemporary American composers seek both inspiration and collaboration from his body of work. In studying the American art song in the hopes of understanding its contemporary identity with regard to text setting, one finds that countless composers of the 20th and 21st centuries, from Northwestern graduate and art song specialist Ned Rorem to contemporary crossover composer Ricky Ian Gordon, are attracted to the unique challenges and opportunities presented by the musical voice and visual orthography of e.e. cummings, which helps to bring out not only an American musical identity but also a uniquely American voice and cultural aesthetic and context. While their songs have been well received when performed in small recitals on campus, they are performed infrequently on a wider scale, have never been researched, and are rarely professionally recorded, which creates a gap in information and appreciation of these works of art. I hope to fill this gap with this research project and farther in the future. In presenting this project, I hope to answer the following questions: With what techniques do American art song composers unite the melodic but visually avant-garde texts of e.e. cummings to contemporary classical music? Can these compositions aid us in better understanding and performing the contemporary style of American song?

If awarded a grant, I will spend the first two weeks (1) locating all available scores and, in the rare case of their availability, recordings in order to compartmentalize the texts into poetic categories within which I can compare them, and (2) analyzing the poetry on a musical level, using my music theory and singing background, in order to establish these categories, which I will define with regard to the pervasiveness of specific elements of cummings’s visual orthography (punctuation, partitioning or misspelling words, and blank space) and by noting specific locations within the poems where composers might be forced to experiment with translating these visual cues into music. Cummings, with his breadth of style from more
traditional to extremely avant-garde poetry, largely attracts composers looking to reconcile
the visual elements of his poetry and set them to music; these elements will act as flags for where
examination of musical techniques will be effective. In weeks three and four, I will study
Dominick Argento and Ricky Ian Gordon’s sets of five songs. Gordon’s and flowers pick
themselves and Argento’s Songs about spring feature some of the same texts (Appendix C) as
well as thematic and visual consistencies among all the poems, which will make these cycles a
good starting place for my musical analysis. I will use the similar poems to compare specific
settings, focusing on timbre, use of voice, text setting, form (in setting the songs as a cycle, and
also in the organization of each individual song), and register and density of voice and piano. In
interviewing award-winning composer Liza White about this subject, she suggested that these
areas inspire a study of American composers’ struggle to step away from “what we assume
about the art song and do without thinking about it.” In week five, working with the same
sets/cycles, I will be using what I have already analyzed inform a broader examination of the
tonality of these songs. This consists of Roman Numeral analysis as a starting point and, from
there, examining the way that the vocal line interacts with the piano. Taking what I have
established in terms of compositional techniques in a more linear understanding (reading of text,
looking horizontally at the form and progression of the work) I will turn to looking vertically at the
chordal structure and key relationships of the pieces. In the last three weeks, I will expand the
same tactic of analysis to individual songs rather than cycles (see Appendix C) with a more
diverse set of poems, thus using the trends I’ve noticed and analysis systems and techniques
which I have already grown accustomed to in order to handle a more diverse set of texts and
text settings. I will, throughout this time, also be looking at composer interviews, contacting local
composers and experts for interviews, and interviewing some of these top-tier composers
myself using my connections through the Bienen artist in residence program. This process will
allow me to approach the texts and their song counterparts from the mindset of a composer and
understand the different logical and creative processes for assigning form, melody, and the
aforementioned musical qualities to the texts they set. For a list of these composers, professors,
and interviews, see Appendix B.

I am qualified to conduct this research because of my interests in contemporary classical
music, the art song genre, and poetry. I have taken three years of music theory, the latter two of
which were on Northwestern’s advanced theory track, and two years of aural skills, which deals
with the auditory analysis of music. Two quarters of these classes were devoted specifically to
the analysis of art songs as both individual pieces and entire cycles, though, like most
scholarship, they focused only on German lied. I have taken one year of music history and two
quarters of musicology, in which I am pursuing a minor, which deals specifically with the
understanding of musical aesthetics in a cultural and historical context. In the spring, I intend to
take Prof. Drew Davies’s class on Art Song in English, as well as a class in the performance of
art songs. My second, ad hoc major, called “Musical Language,” focuses partially on foreign
language as well as poetic analysis. I have taken two creative writing classes for this major
already: Reading and Writing Poetry and Reading and Writing Creative Nonfiction, which deals
with poetic writing in a prose form. I am also working with Prof. Rachel Webster to prepare my
portfolio of poetry to apply to the creative writing poetry sequence. Finally, I have taken part in
and received awards in NATS art song competitions, and I have also collaborated with recent
composition graduate Patrick Hockberger to commission, compose, and perform a new art song
which sets the cummings text “you are tired.”

While this research project will culminate in a paper, my future plans regarding this
research include my using what I have learned to perform a recital featuring all these works with
appropriate performance practice, American style, and use of the voice. I also hope to end the
program by collaborating with Liza White to, with my research in mind, commission and perform
a new song with a cummings text.
Appendix A: Bibliography


White, Liza. Personal Interview. 10 Mar. 2014.
Appendix B: Contacts and Interviews

Professors and Composers Contacted and Interviewed
- Prof. Drew Davies, Musicology
- Prof. Jesse Rosenberg, Musicology
- Prof. Rachel Webster, Poetry
- Liza White, Lecturer in Music Theory and Aural Skills, DM Candidate in Composition, award winning composer of art song
- Patrick Hockberger, graduated from the Bienen School of Music with a BM in Composition in 2013, composer of art song, collaborator on the setting of texts by e.e. cummings
- Kenn Kumpf, graduated from Bienen School of Music with a DM in Composition in 2013, former lecturer in advanced theory, current adjunct professor of composition at Columbia College, active composer in Chicagoland area

Professional Interviews Located
- Bruce Duffie interviews of the following composers of songs with texts by cummings:
  - David Diamond
  - Libby Larsen
  - Ned Rorem

Composers with Relationships to the Bienen School of Music
- If awarded a grant, I will reach out to these composers specifically to conduct my own interviews regarding their settings of cummings’s texts.
  - William Bolcom (visiting artist)
  - Ricky Ian Gordon (visiting artist)
  - John Musto (visiting artist)
  - Ned Rorem (graduated with a degree in conducting)
Appendix C: Musical Selections

**Dominick Argento**: *Songs about spring*

> who knows if the moon’s a balloon -- Spring is like a perhaps hand -- in Just-spring -- in
> Spring comes -- when faces called flowers float out of the ground

**Ricky Ian Gordon**: *and flowers pick themselves*

> i thank you God for most this amazing -- why did you go -- thy fingers make early flowers
> of -- anyone lived in a pretty how town -- who knows if the moon’s a balloon

**William Bolcom**: “may i feel”

**David Diamond**: “i carry your heart”

**John Duke**: “i carry your heart”

**Patrick Hockberger**: “you are tired”

**Lee Hoiby**: “always, it’s Spring”

**Libby Larsen**: ”song”

**John Musto**: “maggie and milly and molly and may”

**Ned Rorem**: “Doll’s boy”