

Dear Theo: Letters from Vincent Van Gogh  
tenor, percussion  
JH - V009

Jocelyn Hagen

\$12.00

jocelyn hagen

Dear Theo: Letters from Vincent Van Gogh  
for tenor and percussion

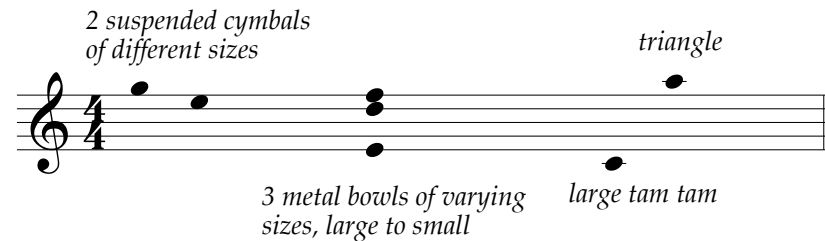


jocelynhagen.com

# Dear Theo: Letters from Vincent Van Gogh

is scored for tenor and one percussionist, playing marimba (5 octave) and auxiliary percussion (shown below)

## Percussion Setup



## Program Notes

As David Walton, Erik Barsness (the commissioners) and I began to discuss the specifics of this commission for tenor and percussion, I was intrigued to learn that a new song reflecting on mental illness and its effects would be a compelling subject for them. I immediately began to research poems by poets who suffered from mental illness ~ there is a long list to choose from, unfortunately. Nothing was inspiring me. I can't remember how the idea of Vincent Van Gogh came up ~ maybe I had recently seen or pictured one of his paintings. I then discovered these letters written by Van Gogh to his brother Theo while in an asylum in the south of France. There are over 700 letters in all, and they were collected and published by Theo's wife Johanna in 1914.

The text for this work is comprised of excerpts from these letters, dated October 1888 - July 1890 (the last two years of Van Gogh's life), when he suffered from frequent mental breakdowns. By reading his letters I discovered that he was very self-critical, full of self-doubt, and even though he is now considered one of the most influential masters of 20th century painting, his art went unrecognized during his lifetime. His brother, Theo, acted as his patron and art dealer, and, as evidenced by the letters, had unwavering faith in his brother's talent.

Van Gogh tells his brother about the weather, the painting techniques he experiments with, and the effect of his mental illness on his work. I was especially intrigued with his writings on color ~ very particular and often related to his mental state at the time. When composing this song, I wanted to capture all these variances of color, especially in the percussion. This project has also been deeply meaningful to me because of my own experiences with the crippling mental health of a family member. As an artist it was also comforting to read of another artist's obsessions and struggles surrounding their art. I also feel "the need to work" at any given moment of the day. My composing is such a huge part of my identity as a person, and focusing on my craft centers and stabilizes me, much like it did for Van Gogh.

## *Dear Theo: Letters from Vincent Van Gogh*

I do what I do surrendering myself to nature, without thinking of this or that.

...it's nature that I feed on. I exaggerate, sometimes I make changes to the subject. Nevertheless, I don't invent the whole picture - on the contrary I find it ready made in nature but in need of unraveling.

[7 October, 1888]

To work up the heat to melt those golds and flower tones isn't something that just anyone can do; it takes all the energy and concentration a single individual can muster.

[23 January, 1889]

Since it's still winter here, please just let me get on with my work; if it's the work of a madman, that's just too bad. There's nothing I can do about it.

[28 January 1889]

I keep thinking about the need to work, and I believe that I'll regain my full ability for work quite soon. But I often find work so absorbing that I can become very preoccupied and inept about sorting out the rest of my life.

[mid-May 1889]

You'll appreciate that this combination of ochre-red, green made dull with gray, and black lines defining the contours — that all this produces something of that feeling of anguish known as "black-red" often experienced by my companions in misfortune. And for that matter, the subject of a mighty tree struck by lightning and the sickly, green-pink smile of the last flower of autumn serve to confirm this idea.

[20 November 1889]

*When I was writing this letter I got up to put a few brushstrokes on a canvas I'm working on — in fact, it's the one with the battered pine trees against a red, orange and yellow sky — yesterday it was very fresh — the tones pure and bright — well, I don't know what came into my head while I was writing and looking at the canvas, but I told myself that it wasn't right. So I took a color that appeared on the palette, a dirty, matte white that you get by mixing white, green, and a little carmine. And I plastered this green tone all over the sky, and at a distance it does indeed soften the tones by breaking them up; and yet it would seem as if one was spoiling the canvas and making it dirty. Isn't this exactly what misfortune and illness do to us and to our health, and are we not better off like this, with the fate that destiny ordains, than serene and in good health by the lights of our own vague ideas and desires of possible happiness? I cannot tell.*

[ca. 10 December, 1889]

I fell ill at the time I was doing the almond blossom. If I'd been able to continue working, you can tell from it that I would have done more trees in blossom. Now the blossom on the trees is almost over, I really have no luck.

[30 April, 1890]

And to be honest, it is only through our pictures that we can speak. Dear brother...through me you have your part to play in the actual production of certain canvases, which even in the midst of this disaster retain their calm.

*For that's where we are, and that is all or at least the main thing I have to tell you at this moment of relative crisis. At a moment when things are very fraught among those dealing in pictures by artists both living and dead.*

*As for my own work, I risk my life for it and my sanity is half shot away because of it — fine — but you're not one of those dealers in men as far as I know, and you can choose the side you're on, it seems to me, and act with genuine humanity, but what's to be done?*

[24 July 1890]\*

*\*This letter was an unfinished draft of letter 251. It was found on Vincent's body when he died on 27 July.*

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Dear Theo: Letters from Vincent Van Gogh / Hagen

14

T

8

changes to the sub-ject. — Ne-ver the-less, I don't in-vent the whole pic-ture on the con-tra-ry I find it read-y made in

Perc.

Mrb.

17

T

8

na-ture — but in need of un-rav-el-ing. — un-rav-el-ing. —

Perc.

Mrb.

PERUSAL ONLY

Dear Theo: Letters from Vincent Van Gogh / Hagen

T 21  
8  
mf  
To work up the heat

Perc.

Mrb.  
mf  
tremolo sempre

T 27  
8  
to melt those golds and flow-er tones is - n't some-thing just an - y - one can do;

Mrb.  
mp  
mf

T 31  
8  
it takes all the e - ner - gy and con - cen - tration a sin - gle in - di - vi - dual can

Mrb.  
sub. p

Dear Theo: Letters from Vincent Van Gogh / Hagen

35

T

mus - ter.

Since it's still win - ter here, please just let me get on with my work;

Mrb.

*f*

**B**

PERUSAL ONLY

40

T

if it's the work of a mad-man, that's just too bad. There's no - thing I can do a-bout it.

Mrb.

*mf* *lightly* *freely*

*fp* *no tremolo on quarter note* *fp*

**C** *with urgency* ♩ = 120

T

*mp* *mf*

I keep think - ing 'bout the need to work, the need to work, and I be - lieve that I'll re - gain my

Mrb.

*p* *mf* *p* *mf* *p* *mf*

*no tremolo*

4

Dear Theo: Letters from Vincent Van Gogh / Hagen

49

T

8

full a-bi-li-ty for work quite soon. I keep think-ing, I keep think-ing.

*mp* *mf* *mp*

Mrb.

*p* *mf* *p* *mf* *p*

53

T

8

But I of-ten find work so ab-sorb-ing that I can be-come ve-ry pre-oc-cu-pied and in - ept

*mf* *mp*

Mrb.

*mp* *p* *mf* *p* *mf* *p* *mp*

Dear Theo: Letters from Vincent Van Gogh / Hagen

T 57 *p* a-bout sort-ing out the rest of my life. *mf*

Mrb. 57 *p* *mp* *p* *pp* *f* *p*

T 61 *f* I keep think-ing, *mf* I keep think-ing. *mp* the need to work,

Mrb. 61 *f* *p* *mf* *p* *mp* *p*

Dear Theo: Letters from Vincent Van Gogh / Hagen

65 **E** ♩ = 50

T 8 *mf* You'll ap-pre-ci-ate that this com-bi-na-tion of och-re-red, green made dull with gray, and

Perc.

Mrb. *tremolo sempre* *mf*

69 8 *mf* black lines de-fin-ing the con-tours, that all this pro-du-ces some-thing of that feel-ing of an-guish known as "black-red" of-ten ex-

Perc.

Mrb.

PERUSAL ONLY

Dear Theo: Letters from Vincent Van Gogh / Hagen

73

T  
8 pe-rienced by my com-pan-ions in mis - for-tune. And for that mat-ter, the sub-ject of a might-y tree struck by light-ning

Perc.

Mrb.

**F**

T  
8 and the sick-ly, green-pink smile of the last flow-er of aut-umn serve to con - firm this i - de - a.

Perc.

Mrb.

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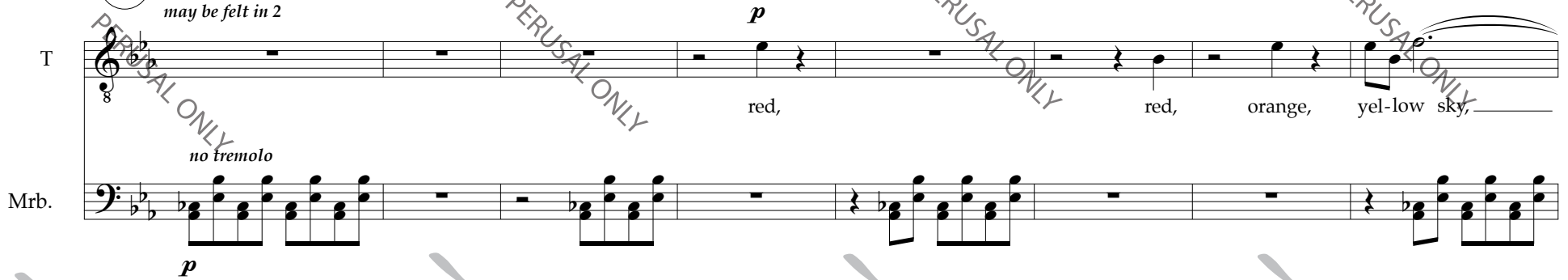
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Dear Theo: Letters from Vincent Van Gogh / Hagen

**G** *thoughtfully* ♩ = 120  
may be felt in 2

T 8 *p*  
red, red, orange, yel-low sky,

Mrb. *no tremolo*  
*p*



T 92  
red, orange, yel-low sky,

Mrb.



T 99  
pure and bright, pure and bright, it was-n't right. it was-n't

Mrb. *mp*  
*p*





Dear Theo: Letters from Vincent Van Gogh / Hagen

126

T

o-ver the sky. I plast-ered this green tone all o-ver the sky.

Perc.

let vibrate

Mrb.

131

T

I

pp

p

I fell ill at the time I was do - ing the

Mrb.

p

136

T

al-mond blos-som. If I'd been ab-le to con-ti-nue work-ing. (exhale) I would have done more trees in

Mrb.

mf

sub. p

Dear Theo: Letters from Vincent Van Gogh / Hagen

140

T 8 *p* *rit.* G.P. *G.P.*

blos - som. Now the blos - som on the trees is al - most o - ver, I real - ly have no luck.

Mrb. *pp* *G.P.*

**J** ♩ = 50

T 8 *mp*

Dear Bro - ther, through me you have your part to

Perc. *no tremolo* *p*

Mrb. *mp*

149

T 8 play in the ac - tu - al pro - duc - tion of cer - tain can - vas - es, which e - ven in the midst of this di -

Perc.

Mrb.

Dear Theo: Letters from Vincent Van Gogh / Hagen

(K)

*rit.*

152

T 8

sas-ter re-tain their calm. And to be hon-est, it is on-ly through our pic - tures that we can

Perc.

Mrb.

156

T 8

speak. through our pic - tures that we speak.

(linger)

Perc.

Mrb.

*p*

*pp*

# Jocelyn Hagen

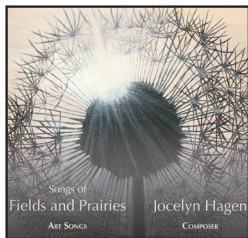


Jocelyn Hagen (b.1980), a native of Valley City, North Dakota, composes music that has been described as “dramatic and deeply moving” (Star Tribune, Minneapolis/St. Paul). Her first forays into composition were via songwriting, and this is very evident in her work. The majority of her compositional output is for voice: solo, chamber and choral. In 2012 she collaborated with choreographer Penelope Freeh to create “Slippery Fish,” a quartet for 2 dancers, soprano and viola, and the piece was reviewed as “completely original in all respects.” (Star Tribune, Minneapolis/St. Paul). Currently she is Artist-in-Residence at the North

Dakota State University School of Music, where she teaches, writes curriculum and brings in collaborators to perform her work.

Jocelyn holds degrees in Theory, Composition, and Vocal Music Education from St. Olaf College, as well as a Masters degree in Composition from the University of Minnesota. Jocelyn has received grants and awards from ASCAP, the American Composers Forum, Minnesota Music Educators Association, the McKnight Foundation, the Jerome Foundation, VocalEssence, the Yale Glee Club, the Lotte Lehman Foundation, the Sorel Medallion Competition, the Cincinnati Camerata, the University of Minnesota, and the San Francisco Song Festival. Her commissions include the American Choral Directors Association, Texas, Georgia and Connecticut Choral Directors Associations, the North Dakota Music Teacher’s Association, The Singers – Minnesota Choral Artists, Trio Callisto, the Murasaki Duo, Cantus, the Houston Chamber Choir, the Metropolitan Symphony Orchestra, the St. Olaf Band, NDSU Gold Star Band, the ND Army Band, and the Copper Street Brass Quintet. Her music is independently published through her website as well as through Graphite Publishing, Santa Barbara Music Publishing and Boosey and Hawkes.

Recordings available at [JocelynHagen.com](http://JocelynHagen.com):



## Independently published vocal works by Jocelyn Hagen:

<i>...and then we were left</i>	song cycle for baritone, cello, and guitar
<i>Dear Theo: Letters from Vincent Van Gogh</i>	extended song for tenor and percussion
<i>Hope</i>	song cycle for high voice and piano
<i>Kiss</i>	song cycle for soprano and piano
<i>love. songs</i>	song cycle for baritone and piano
<i>love. songs</i>	song cycle for soprano and piano
<i>Songs of Fields and Prairies</i>	song cycle for soprano and piano
<i>The Sweetness of my Dreams</i>	song cycle for mezzo-soprano and piano
<i>The Time of Singing Has Come</i>	song cycle for soprano, tenor, and piano
“The Flower of the Field” from <i>Songs of Fields and Prairies</i>	high voice and piano
“Gwendolen’s Dream”	soprano, clarinet in A, and cello
“i carry your heart” from <i>love. songs</i>	voice and piano
“In My Soul” from <i>amass</i>	baritone, cello, and guitar
“Inventing Truths” from <i>amass</i>	tenor and cello
“Love Song”	baritone and violin
“Para mi corazòn”	medium-high voice and piano
“Silver Wing” from <i>Test Pilot</i>	soprano and viola
“To My Daughter, After a Fight”	voice and piano
“The Wedding is the Promise” from <i>The Time of Singing Has Come</i>	voice and piano

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