

John McDonald
Three Crueler Tangos, Op. 450 (2009-2010)
for soprano, oboe, clarinet, violin, and two pianos

Commissioned by “Tango Nuevo,” a special project of the Longy School of Music
With thanks to Linda Cutting-Whited and Cristi Catt

A re-working of my setting of Sandra Steingraber’s poem triptych *Three Cruel Tangos* from 1995 (Op. 233, for soprano, ten winds instruments, and contrabass; commissioned by Basil Chapman for his Harmonie Chamber Winds), *Three Crueler Tangos* attempts a leaner, meaner version that essentially changes/tightens the doublings, couplings, and consistencies of the instrumental writing of the original and nothing more. An exercise in retrospection, I was pleased to discover that the poems and music retain a certain freshness and bite. This more portable, differently shaded manifestation of the piece will hopefully offer it a more varied performance life. (J.McD., January 2010)

Sandra Steingraber
Three Cruel Tangos
(March 18, 1995)

1. Icestorm Tango

In winter when rain falls and freezes.
The weight of water twisting cedars
to the ground. When to move means

to break apart. A cedar sheeted in ice
when the wind begins. Then stops.
Waxwings blinking by the glass berries.

It is just the uselessness of splendor.
It is just the burden of splendor.
It is just the insanity of splendor.

2. Windstorm Tango

Walking through a field of winter wheat
in spring and wanting to be walking

anywhere but in this field of wheat,
a bad wind blowing in her eyes and roads

filling up with branches. Well,
in this dust they could be anything:

Maps. Dreams. Pieces of trees.

3. Evaporation Tango

There should be a way of killing oneself
without involving the police.
But she cannot think of one
and the mere thought of their sausage

hands rolling her out on the muddy bank
and poking at her cold breasts
is enough to keep her alive
for now. A black sun rises.

It should be possible to evaporate
cell by cell into the plain air.
To end as a shimmer in a canopy
of upturned leaves.