

Pacific Passions: Music by West Coast Composers

March 18, 19, 20 in Campbell, San Francisco and Palo Alto

Comments by the composers on their compositions.



Eric Whitacre

With a Lily in Your Hand

Poetry: Federico Garcia Lorca, 1898-1936

<http://ericwhitacre.com/>

Eric attended The University of Nevada, Las Vegas, and sang with David Weller. Here is a short excerpt from Eric's website where he writes about composing "With a Lily in Your Hand".

"I was accepted into the advanced choir in my 2nd year. David has this beautiful tradition of programming a different setting of Go, Lovely Rose every year with that choir, and after my first year in that group I decided to write him a setting that would be all his own. We performed it the next year (1991), and in the spring of 1992 we concluded our program at the Western Regional ACDA convention in Hawaii with my music. My very first concert piece! And just when I thought life couldn't get any better, Barbara Harlow of Santa Barbara Music found me after the performance and told me that she would like to publish the work.

Barbara thought that it might make a nice set, so I found two more flower poems (I Hide Myself and With a Lily in Your Hand) and set them using small bits of material from Go, Lovely Rose."



Frank Ticheli

Earth Song

Poetry: Frank Ticheli

<http://www.FrankTicheli.com>

Earth Song is one of only a few works that I have composed without a commission. Instead, it sprang out of a personal need during a time when so many in this country, include myself, were growing disillusioned with the war in Iraq. I felt a strong impulse to create something that would express my own personal longing for peace.

It was this longing which engendered the poem's creation. Normally, I would spend countless hours, weeks, perhaps months, searching for the perfect poem to set. But in this case, I knew I had to write the poem myself, partly because it is not just a poem, but a prayer, a plea, a wish--a bid to find inner peace in a world that seems eternally bent on war and hatred.

But also, the poem is a steadfast declaration of the power of music to heal. In the end, the speaker in the poem discovers that, through music, he is the embodiment of hope, peace, the song within the Song. Perhaps music has the power not only to nurture inner peace, but also to open hearts and ears in a world that desperately needs love and listening.



Frank Ferko

The Spring of Life

Premiere: Commissioned by BCG

Poetry: from *The Morning Star*, Kenneth Rexroth, 1905-1982

<http://www.frankferko.com>

For some years now, I have been an admirer of the poetry of Kenneth Rexroth, and since Rexroth was a West Coast poet, his work immediately came to mind when Sanford asked me to write a piece for the Bay Choral Guild. Many of the poems of Rexroth are Haiku-like pieces, succinct and vivid in their imagery. As it happened, I found three short poems about different aspects of spring, so I decided to set all three of them to music as a multi-part work. All three pieces were composed for unaccompanied mixed chorus, and all three make use of the technique of text painting. Throughout my career as a vocal and choral composer I have enjoyed the challenge of finding appropriate and interesting ways to depict the words and phrases of poets in musical language. Kenneth Rexroth's poems provide abundant opportunities to explore a wide variety of musical colors and interpretations, so I found my work with this piece to be particularly satisfying.

The first piece, titled *Spring*, speaks of the full moon of spring and its effects on nature. The moon has always been a symbol of mystery, and in this music I suggested that mystery through the use of ambiguous harmonies which resemble in some ways the harmonic language of Ravel. The chorus engages in some dramatic musical movement depicting "rising" and "pushing" as described in the poem. The words "crystal ball," "pale velvet," and "gems" all suggest color to me, so the phrases with those words were set to very colorful harmonies that keep shifting, like a gem stone that turns in the light. The second piece, *This Spring*, is a bit more somber in tone. The text is about distances and vast spaces, so the music was written to depict open, endless space. The final piece, *Spring is Early*, returns to the joyful nature of the first piece, but this time the music begins with a four-voice fugue, sung to the word "la," which was interpolated as an added expression of carefree happiness. (That word does not actually appear in Rexroth's poem.) The poem is a love poem that speaks of the abundant bursts of fragrant new life--and love. The music in the main body of the piece moves in an upward motion suggesting the rising fragrances of springtime. The piece then concludes with a reprise of the fugue as a final expression of joy.



Eric Banks

Etternalmente vive

Sonetto CCLXXVII by Michelangelo, 1475-1564

<http://www.ericbanks.com>

I composed *Etternalmente vive* in 2005, a year that I spent setting eleven of Michelangelo's sonnets for chorus a cappella. It is a companion piece to another setting, *O notte*, and in both works I employ a harmonic phrase that repeats and traverses the entire 'circle of fifth,' or through every key signature. In the case of EV, the progression starts very low, and ends very high (and subtracts flats and adds sharps to the key signature).

In ON, the progression moves in the opposite direction, adding flats and bringing darkness to the musical "color wheel." As the six-part choral progression rises from the choral depths, the sopranos sections unite to sing an Italianate melody at the beginning of EV, and as this progression rises through the choral voices, the melody is subsumed by the combined altos, tenors, and basses. For me, this exchange of range between melody and harmony (two of the most salient dimensions of music) represent the relationship between art and nature, or memory and reality, in Michelangelo's poem. The unchanging harmonic progression and its steady accompanying rhythm, for me, symbolize both the inevitable march of time and the timeless quality of the memory, once recalled to our mind.



Trevor Doherty

The Two Ships

Poetry: Bret Harte, 1863-1902

Premiere: Commissioned by BCG

<http://www.trevordoherty.com/>

Shortly before beginning *The Two Ships*, I had recently made a 72-hour journey from New York to San Francisco by train. Traveling overland greatly intensified my sense of place: I comprehended, as never before, the distances I have traveled throughout my life, and sensed the profound effects that even small changes in location have had on my psyche. Therefore, knowing that the Bay Choral Guild was planning a concert of "California Composers," I chose to set a poem about the most formative place in my life.

While searching for texts, I was fortunate enough to find Bret Harte's *The Two Ships*, which appealed to me not only for its lyrical character and allegorical imagery, but because of the poet's intimate connection to the California landscape. Harte was born in New York in 1836, and migrated to Humboldt County at 17; though largely uneducated, he pursued a career as a poet and journalist, and eventually became nationally known for his romantic representations of frontier life. Drawn by his literary aspirations, Harte returned to New York in 1871; driven by lack of critical success, he spent the last two decades of his life in Europe, working for the foreign service. His experience of California, however, never left him, and his verse, beneath its at times unpolished surface, is tempered with an authentic, palpable, and unique sense of the place.

Initially, I struggled with writing, because the text called for a simpler and more open style than I was used to, and I scrapped at least one version of the piece before it took its present shape. In the end, I chose to set most of the text in short canonic phrases, in which individual vocal entries gradually coalesce into an homorhythmic statement of the last few syllables of a line, like strands of twine being braided into a rope. This approach creates a sense of textural accretion, that mirrors a similar sense that was impressed on me while reading the poem. Rather than casting the piece into a two-verse structure, I divided the poem into four sections of four lines each, and sought to give each its own distinct musical character: the first section (along with the recapitulatory fourth section) presents the accretion idea, introducing the world of the poem; the second section's broad chorale writing evokes a flying ship; the third section's shorter, more polyphonic phrases suggest the glittering portals of the gate. The piece ends with an echo of the opening text. To me, the poem can either depict the beginning of a journey or the end of one, and I wanted to call attention to that ambiguity; beginnings and endings have a lot in common, and as I came to the end of my train trip, I experienced a similar ambiguity in my own life.

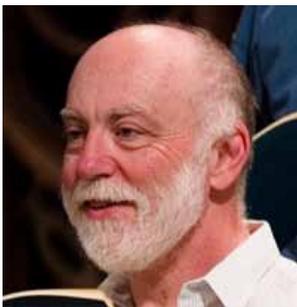


Morten Lauridsen

Soneto de la Noche

Poetry: Pablo Neruda, 1904-1973

<http://mortenlauridsen.com>



L Peter Deutsch

The Dimensions of Love

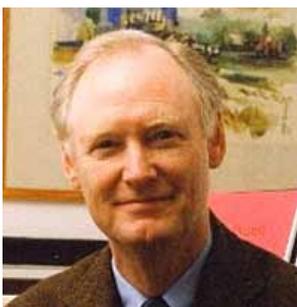
Premiere: Commissioned by BCG

Poetry: e.e. cummings, 1894-1962

<http://www.major2nd.com/ae/music/index.html>

Because of circumstances, I had just under three weeks to write “The Dimensions of Love.” I decided immediately to look for a 20th-century secular text in English, preferably American. My partner and I both like E. E. Cummings, and we have several collections of his work, so we sat down and each made a list of relatively short poems of his that we liked. There were only three poems on both our lists, and I picked the one I liked best.

In every piece I write, I try to pick one direction in which to explore or stretch my skills. For “The Dimensions of Love,” I decided it would be variety of texture (which voice parts are active). When I started writing, it seemed natural to have the phrase with the word “thicker” expand into a thick 5-part texture, followed by a “thinner” texture of the high 3 parts. I had also been thinking about the expanding from-a-unison gesture beforehand. The contrast between the minor harmonies for “mad and moonly” and major for “sane and sunly” was a bit of (perhaps too obvious) word association. The harmonic progression in the first half is from D minor through various by-ways to a unison F#; this is the dominant of the B minor that begins the second half, which is the relative minor of the final D major chord. D to D -- not an accident.



Kirke Mechem

The Winds of May

Poetry: Sara Teasdale, 1884-1933

<http://www.kirkemechem.com>

My pieces will be coming home, in a sense. I wrote most of them as an undergraduate at Stanford in 1949. I first became acquainted with Sara Teasdale’s poetry through Edna Bradley Troxell, to whom the cycle is dedicated. She was the mother of my girl friend and colleague in the music department, Cynthia Troxell (now Dunoyer). Since then I have set many Teasdale poems; in my opinion, she is the greatest lyric poet America has ever had. She must have loved music, as her poems seem to sing themselves.

All the poems are about love, and the cycle tells a story. Each poem begins where its predecessor left off. After the first “falters blindly . . . and goes out,” the second tries to forget that trauma. But in the three-part dialogue of No. 3, the men remind us that the heart has been shut and “Love may starve therein,” but the women gently sing of “a new wind of May”; it does not, however, alter the men’s demand to be free. In No. 4, the women have resigned themselves to a hopeless death, when “I shall be more silent and cold-hearted than you are now.” The final song proves the resilience of young love; the men and women agree upon the lighthearted philosophy that “you must love me gladly, or goodbye to you.” Musically I have followed the same sequential flow: The penultimate open fifth on F of No. 1 begins and ends No. 2. It is the dominant of the principal key of No. 3, B-flat. The third note—D— of that chord becomes the minor key of No. 4, and then becomes the first note of the finale, in G major, where the cycle began.



Robert Kyr
Canticle of the Brother Sun
St. Francis of Assisi, 1181-1226

<http://www.robertkyr.com/>

“Canticle of the Brother Sun” is a setting of several stanzas from a religious song by St. Francis of Assisi, originally titled “Laudes Creaturarum” (“Praise of the Creatures”) and composed in the Umbrian dialect. It is often recognized as one of the first works of literature in the Italian language, an example of St. Francis’ efforts to write in the vernacular of the people, as opposed to Latin, the language of the church. The canticle clearly reveals the theology of St. Francis and his order, which celebrates nature in all of its life-sustaining aspects, and acknowledges the special place of animals as brothers and sisters of humankind.

In my “Canticle of the Brother Sun,” the chorus is divided into smaller ensembles to embody different aspects of nature: Brother Sun (full chorus); Sister Moon (women); Brother Wind (men); Sister Water (women); Brother Fire (men), and Mother Earth (full chorus). The setting emphasizes the strophic form of the St. Francis prayer by giving the role of the sisters (moon and water) to women’s chorus, and the role of the brothers (wind and fire) to men’s chorus, thus creating so that a little musical drama that is narrated in song. The full chorus frames the drama with an introduction and an epilogue, which embody Brother Sun and Mother Earth, respectively. The ending of the work is a chorale-like coda that is my own distillation of the inner meaning of St. Francis’ text: “Praise...In peace...In light... Praise.”

“Canticle of the Brother Sun” was commissioned by the Concord Community of Choirs (David York, conductor) for their Italian summer tour of 1998. It was premiered at the Papal Basilica of St. Francis of Assisi (begun in 1228, four years after the creation of the prayer), which is located in the town of Assisi in Umbria; the saint is buried beneath the lower basilica where the canticle was first performed. The site is a UNESCO World Heritage Site (since 2000) and continues to be one of the most important destinations of Christian pilgrimages in Italy. On September 26, 1997, Assisi was struck by a deadly earthquake, which seriously damaged the upper Basilica, and in the following summer, the premiere of “Canticle of the Brother Sun” was dedicated to those in the region who suffered in any way from the tragic natural disaster.



Kurt Erickson
Let All Mortal Flesh Keep Silence
Liturgy of St. James

<http://www.kurterickson.com/>

My setting of Let All Mortal Flesh Keep Silence was first commissioned and premiered as part of a 2001-2003 Composer Residency I held at The National Shrine of Saint Francis of Assisi (SF, CA). The piece has been performed in San Francisco, Minneapolis, Napa, Texas, Australia, and released on a 2004 CD by Schola Cantorum SF entitled This Christmas Night.

I’ve always found the traditional melody associated with this hymn to be strangely compelling - my piece starts with this melody over a hushed vocal drone to underscore its unique beauty. After this brief introduction, I set each subsequent verse in a slightly different variation, creating a kind of musical narrative that shadows the text in describing an ascent towards the Godhead (not unlike Dante’s Paradiso, I suppose). The climax of the piece comes at verse four when the hymn describes the angelic host of heaven singing praise to God.

Realizing the futility (not to mention presumptuousness) of trying to recreate what this might actually sound like, the music I created for this section uses four soloists singing cascading vocal lines that are static (mirroring the unceasing praise of the angels) in ambiguous major/minor patterns. Since we can’t possibly envision such a heavenly scene, I created music that

likewise doesn't really fit our perception of traditional major/minor tonalities.

At the end of the piece the original melody and first verse are restated, as if the observer is given the chance to re-sing this beautiful melody after contemplating the divine. The 'Alleluia's' at the climax come back, but this time they are presented with a kind of hushed reverence that comes after participating in a religiously cathartic experience.

I've always felt a special connection to this piece, and I hope you enjoy it.



Kevin Memley

Ave Maria

<http://www.kevinmemley.com/>

Ave Maria was written for the Clovis East High School Timberwolf Chorus, one of several choirs I accompany in Central California. We premiered the work in Carnegie Hall in April 2008. It was written in 2007, and quite oddly was input directly into a computer. I have no hand-written draft. I mention this only because as of late, I have become attached to good old-fashioned pencil and paper and truly enjoy the feel of the composition process at the piano. The 'cascading waterfall' effect, and the few pages of rhythms are meant to provide nothing more than a palette of colors to support the melody. I have heard many versions of this work performed, and I find it helpful when I do clinics on this piece to remind the director and choir that once we settle into D major, it becomes somewhat antiphonal between the men and women. I would encourage the entire choir to be mindful of balance, because the melody shifts across many voices in this piece. The best results I have seen in performance have been in some form of block or modified block arrangement. I have found it best to let people interpret the piece in their own way and am grateful that it is receiving wonderful recognition.



Sanford Dole

Prayer of St. Francis

St. Francis of Assisi, 1181-1226

<http://www.sanforddole.com/>

I was introduced to this prayer when I was in high school, shortly after I began making my first attempts at composing. From the start I had the idea that it would make a great text for a double choir anthem; one choir lining out the dilemma and the other responding with the solution (e.g. Choir I: "Where there is doubt, " Choir II: "faith," etc.)

This concept has occasionally resurfaced over the years with the thought, "Some day I'll set that text!" Finally the time arrived in 2008 as I was putting together the program for a concert at St. Gregory of Nyssa Church, where I am the music director. We decided to present the first in a series of concerts that would relate to the spectacular icon of The Dancing Saints that graces the upper half of the church's rotunda. Each piece was either composed by, had a text by, or in some way directly related to one of the 90 historical figures that are represented in the mural. Members of the choir contributed new compositions honoring the likes of Charles Wesley, King David, the prophet Isaiah, and John Mason Neale. We also sang William Byrd's "Mass for Four Voices," a hymn by Queen Liliuokalani of Hawaii and David Conte's "Prayer of St. Theresa." Here was my chance to set the "Prayer of St. Francis" (the only saint depicted that seems to be looking directly at the image of Jesus). Unfortunately, as part of a program of new and challenging works, the premiere of this piece did not go as well as I might have liked. And it is a little too long and too difficult to sing on a Sunday morning. So it sat on the shelf until now. Perhaps Bay Choral Guild's performance should be considered the true premiere.

In looking at the music by Robert Kyr, whom I had decided would represent Oregon on our West Coast composers show, I realized that his "Canticle of the Brother Sun," which sets another text by Francis, would make for a nice counterpoint to my piece. His canticle also divides the choir in two, but does so vertically rather than horizontally. The middle section alternates between the upper choir of women and the lower choir of men, whereas my piece bounces from a complete mixed choir on the left to another on the right.



David Conte

Cantate Domino

Psalm 149

<http://www.davidconte.net/>

Cantate Domino was written in 1975 for the Bowling Green State University A Cappella Choir, where I was at that time a 19-year old sophomore. The work won first prize in the University's annual Religious Arts Choral Composition Competition, and was published that year by Beckenhorst Press, making it my first publication. The work was recorded by the St. Olaf Choir, Anton Armstrong, conductor in the 1990s. In 1989 I did a version of this piece for Brass Quartet and Organ for the consecration of Grace Cathedral in San Francisco.

Reviews:

"I hope that I may never be accused of insularity, but our own English choral repertoire is so very good that it is seldom that one feels able to suggest any new work from the other side of the Atlantic as being worthy of consideration by our own church and cathedral choirs. David Conte's anthem *Cantate Domino* is a notable exception however. His skill as a choral writer is established in the very first bar and there are many deft and felicitous touches throughout the work...Its texture and splendid use of antiphony would suggest it as particularly suitable for use in the major parish churches and cathedrals on a festive occasion."

- Musical Opinion (London)

"*Cantate Domino* for double chorus is modeled upon the polychoral style of San Marco in Venice at the end of the 16th century...Conte's antiphonal setting of this popular text lasts about four and one-half minutes, utilizes two equally disposed choruses, and would make an ideal selection for combined choirs at a state or regional festival. *Cantate Domino* is an extremely well-written work suitable for both liturgical and concert use."

- Stephanie Henry, The Choral Journal