



Breathe, November 7 2021

Extended Program Notes

Additional notes to some of the newest music on the program

Vision Chant

Andrew Balfour

Composer Andrew Balfour is of Cree descent, originally from the Winnipeg area and now resides in Toronto. The “vision” described in the title and painted in the music is somewhat fearsome at its climax. The personage of “Windigo”, a fearsome creature, is mentioned (though the minimal text is buried deep inside the texture, in the bass line). For comfort, Grandmother (Nokomis) and Grandfather (Mishomis) are called upon. By the conclusion, there is resolution, and perhaps of awakening to a sunrise. (From a conversation with the composer - JVB)

A Little More Time

Leonard Enns

From the composer:

This piece was composed in the spring of 2020, during the early days of what was to become an extended shutdown because of the pandemic. I had set myself a personal project of writing a short choral work each week, as our social activities became restricted. My commitment lasted for about two months, while, unfortunately, the pandemic had much more staying power. A friend had pointed me to a poem of Rilke’s, from his *Book of Hours*. That poem became the text for one of my early “Covid compositions.” During the work on that [other] composition I was also drawn to *Dunklender Grund*, also from the *Book of Hours*. The text, written by Rilke in his mid-twenties (in 1900), seemed presciently relevant for our time. Ultimately, Rilke asks for “a little more time” before the earth returns to “forest, water, and flourishing wilderness.” This plea reflects his concept of the Divine, which is rooted very much in nature -- what he refers to as “God” is a life force

gradually coming into being -- the dark is a beautiful and potent thing -- hence "you darkening deep" in his opening line expresses the idea of a divine reality that is positive, emerging, and being constantly created. The Book of Hours comes out of Rilke's first of two trips to Russia. Inspired both by the ubiquitous Orthodox iconography and the immense landscapes, and by his associations with Leo Tolstoy and other writers, Rilke sees nature and the world as a pantheistic consciousness slowly coming into existence.

His concepts of "God" reflect an inversion of the common view -- for him God is not light but darkness; rather than Creator, God is being created. However one wishes to unpack that view, there is certainly motivation in the idea that we are responsible for what is to come, that it is time for us to deal with the walls we have created, walls which limit the emerging divine creation; we are called, in Rilke's words, to "love all things, as no one has loved them." That challenge calls to us today, while the earth warms and warns around us. Yet, in his final lines, Rilke introduces a corrective to our hubris -- it is not we who will ultimately do the "writing" of this new reality; our work is controlled by a greater Hand.

Sun on Water

Hussein Janmohamed

From the composer:

Sun on Water originated while living at Fool's Paradise – Canadian artist Doris McCarthy's home and studio – through the Doris McCarthy Artist in Residence Program of the Ontario Heritage Trust. Sun on Water finds its inspiration in the mystery of winter sunrises on Toronto's Scarborough Bluffs. The colours of the rising sun over Lake Ontario revealed a palpable silence and yearning from which the music emerged. The piece, written specially for Toronto's Amadeus Choir, is for a cappella choir and optional Tibetan singing bowl. The texts and musical influences come from Western choral music, Middle Eastern rhythms, Hindu and Indic Ismaili Muslim traditions. Sun on Water begins quietly as deep waters rumble underneath. Sonic layers reflect the yearning of the sun and water, like lover and beloved, for each other. A burst of sun breaks forth. Yet, as the sun's rays shimmer on the surface of the lake, the deep water still echoes their mutual yearning for ultimate union.

and the swallow

Caroline Shaw

From Hyperion Records:

The composer Caroline Shaw was the youngest recipient of the Pulitzer Prize for Music for her composition Partita for 8 voices, and is also possibly the only choral composer who can say she has collaborated with Kanye West. Her music is renowned for its use of extended vocal techniques, the most basic of which can be heard in *And the swallow*, a setting of Psalm 84 which ends with the singers evoking the sound of autumn rains. Shaw spoke of how she was thinking of the Syrian refugee crisis as she composed the work; 'There's a yearning for a home that feels very relevant today. The second verse is: "The sparrow found a house and the swallow her nest, where she may place her young" which is just a beautiful image of a bird trying to keep her children safe—people trying to keep their family safe.'

In Paradisum

Christine Donkin

Setting an ancient text sometimes included in settings of the Requiem Mass, the serenity of this work's beginning and ending is contrasted in its enthralling middle section, denoting the arrival in paradise and chorus of angels. Canadian composer Christine Donkin studied at the U of A and UBC, and composes choral, chamber, and orchestral works which are performed across the continent and beyond. *In Paradisum* began its life as the winner of the Guelph Chamber Choir's 2008 Young Composer Competition. (JVB)

I Breathe

Matthew Emery

I Breathe combines music written by Matthew in fall 2020 for the shorter piece "Breathe", [premiered virtually by Chronos](#) at that time, with new music on text by poet Natalie Fasheh. Find more info in interviews with Matthew, Natalie, and David Almond on our YouTube channel.

Notes from the composer:

"I Breathe" is a work for double choir, built on ideas of binaries: old and new, homophonic and polyphonic, stable and unstable; "I Breathe" incorporates an earlier work of mine: "Breathe". The juxtaposition of styles, texts and gestures is highlighted throughout "I Breathe" through the use of both modern and past poetry,

musical ideas inspired by past eras (Medieval, Baroque, and Renaissance), and juxtaposition of instrumentation: responsorial phrases between choirs, small groups and/or soloists. The work uses these layers of imagery and dialogue to capture the feelings of emotions ranging from hope to despair, and everything in-between that we are facing due to COVID 19. The commissioned poem by Natalie Fasheh exquisitely captures the atmosphere of both the unsettledness, and acceptance that we (I) face(ed) during these times. She both responds to the Petrarch text (used in "Breathe"), and then reaches beyond it.

I Breathe is in a three part form:

- Part one features responsorial phrases alternating virtuosic, florid lines, with block style homophony. There are phrases that may be sung as solos. Part one is a metaphor for the fear, strife and uncertainty of life exemplified through angular melodies, and an evocative, dissonant harmonic palette.
- Part two sees the intersection of both choirs centred around "Breathe". Choir one sings along side choir two, at times in unison, harmony or in juxtaposition. In some ways, the middle movement "Breathe" is an antidote to the tension and angularity of part one; a literal and metaphoric exhalation and collective breath of resolution (hope).
- Part three may be sung by choir one alone, or if possible, joined by all singers. It is a reflection or meditation on the idea of hope, and what it means to breathe; the luxury it is to breathe clean air, unafraid.

Note from poet Natalie Fasheh:

What are we faced with when one is suffering from an illness that is beyond our global knowledge and capacity of physical healing? How has society time and time again, in such situations, grappled with the moments of accepting death, versus fighting for life? What kind of hope does it yield? Inspired by David Almond's story of him and his Mother's COVID-19 experience. The moment in the story that stood out to me was when his mother did not want to fight for her life, contrary to what David and his family wanted. In this poem I attempted to empathetically explore the possible perspective of both the ill mother and her son, on pain, life, death, hope, love, and courage, in such moments of suffering from this mysterious deadly illness.

Let My Love Be Heard

Jake Runestad

From the composer:

Though originally written for Choral Arts Northwest, this work has taken on a new life in light of the atrocities in Paris and Beirut. Jonathan Talberg, the conductor of the choir at Cal State Long Beach, led his singers in a performance during the memorial vigil for Nohemi Gonzalez, a Long Beach student who was killed in the Paris attacks. The day after the vigil, the choir was supposed to begin rehearsing holiday music; however, Jonathan felt that was not appropriate and wanted time for the singers to grieve this loss. So, at the beginning of rehearsal, he passed out a brand new piece of music (Let My Love Be Heard), rehearsed it, and then recorded it. It was posted on SoundCloud and shared in memory of Nohemi and as a plea for peace. Their musical offering is a powerful outpouring of grief but also a glimmer of light. I am honored that this piece, "Let My Love Be Heard," has helped to provide hope in the darkness of our world.

Your Stars to Hold

Stuart Beatch

From the composer:

The text of this piece, by American poet Sara Teasdale, depicts love as an act of comfort and assurance, using cosmic imagery to express the profound safety found in the arms of a loved one. My music tries to capture this warmth through a lush harmonic language and thick choral textures, culminating in a simple repetition of the titular line—suddenly inward and intimate, as if gently whispered.

Salutation

Ēriks Ešēvalds

Bengali poet, composer, painter and essayist Rabindranath Tagore was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1913 for his *Gitānjali* (Song Offerings), from which this text is drawn. Ešēvalds' composition was commissioned and first performed by the National Youth Choir of Great Britain, conducted by Stephen Layton. Here the composer is at his most direct and on-the-sleeve, with an almost chorale-like setting of this text filled with rich imagery. (JVB)