



An Hour to Dance: Choral Music of Gwyneth Walker
Whitman Chorale and Chamber Singers
Robert Bode, conductor
17 World Premiere Recordings!

Program Details

From her earliest years as a composer, choral music has been a strong focus in Gwyneth Walker's musical life. All her choral works have been crafted for specific ensembles, which have ranged from large community choruses, to amateur church choirs, to college octets, and to specialized professional choral ensembles.

Walker's choral catalog contains a wide variety of compositions: from entirely original works (usually on evocative American poetry) to "contemporary adaptations," new compositions that make extensive use of the material of traditional folk songs and spirituals. The emotional landscape marked out by this music is wide as well and ranges from the moving and serious portrait of a full life in the cycle *An Hour to Dance* to the unfettered humor of *Banks of the Ohio*. Her work is beautiful, robust, sensitive, athletic, humorous, and always thoroughly life affirming. It is music that makes deep connections with the performers and the audience. The choral ensembles of Whitman College, and their conductor Robert Bode, have long been associated with Walker's music. The Whitman Chorale cocommissioned the large cycle *An Hour to Dance* in 1997 and Bode's orchestra, the Mid-Columbia Symphony, has performed and commissioned a number of Walker's orchestral works.

HARLEM SONGS

(Langston Hughes)

Harlem Songs (2000) for SATB chorus and piano was commissioned by the Chesapeake Chorale, Paul Rardin, artistic director. The work consists of musical settings of the poetry of Langston Hughes (1902-1967) who lived most of his life in Harlem. His poetry was inspired by the culture of Harlem: spirituals and blues, urban streets and rooftops, faith and endurance. The language is direct, uncluttered and colorful. It is highly American! "Spirituals" is a song of strength. It opens with ascending patterns: "the rising shafts of mountains . . . something strong to put my hands on." The focus then shifts to the strength of song in times of trouble: "I heard my mother singing when life hurt her: Gonna ride in my chariot someday!" The music rises to the affirmation "Sing, O black mother! Song is a strong thing."

Spirituals

Ken Anderson, soloist

Rocks and the firm roots of trees.
The rising shafts of mountains.
Something strong to put my hands on.
Sing, O Lord Jesus!
Song is a strong thing-
I heard my mother singing
When life hurt her:
Gonna ride in my chariot some day!
The branches rise
From the firm roots of trees.
The mountains rise
From the solid lap of earth.
The waves rise
From the dead weight of
Sing, O black mother!
Song is a strong thing.

"Harlem Night Song" is infused with the language of blues: major/minor tonalities mixed, a gentle tempo, and humming. This is nocturnal, atmospheric music. The chorus sings "I love you" back and forth, as though calling across the Harlem rooftops. A change of pace in the middle of the song: "Down the street, a band is playing . . ." Scat singing, percussive vocal effects and the phrase "I love you" sung in random patterns bring the song to a close.

Harlem Night Song

Come, Let us roam the night
together
Singing.
love you.
Across
The Harlem roof-tops

Moon is shining.
Night sky is blue.
Stars are great drops
Of golden dew.
Down the street
A band is playing
I love you.
Come,
Let us roam the night together
Singing.

"Tambourines" employs a variety of hand-tapping patterns and vocal sounds to suggest the playing of a tambourine. The intent is to capture the spirit and joy of playing a tambourine (or perhaps an imaginary tambourine!). These "pseudo-tambourines" then accompany several gospel tunes inserted into the middle of this song. A joyous closing section celebrates "tambourines to the glory of God!"

Tambourines

Mollie Price, soloist

Tambourines!
Tambourines!
Tambourines
To the glory of God!
A gospel shout
and a gospel song:
Life is short
But God is Long
Tambourines!
Tambourines!
Tambourines
To glory!

GOD'S GRANDEUR

(Gerald Manley Hopkins)

God's Grandeur (2002) for unaccompanied SATB chorus was commissioned by Opus 7 Vocal Ensemble in Seattle, directed by Loren Pontén. The texts for the set are three poems by the English poet Gerard Manley Hopkins (1844-1899). These poems, which are presented without break, are "God's Grandeur," "The Windhover" (excerpted), and "Pied Beauty." The strong common focus is the glory of God, especially as manifested in the beauty of nature. The musical settings endeavor to allow the inherent rhythms of the words to speak. Therefore, especially in the first song, meters change often. The rhythms are fluid. The tempi accommodate comfortable articulation of the words. Central images in the opening song are "The world is charged with the grandeur of God," which contains triumphant octave leaps in the chorus to portray "charged" and ". . . the Holy Ghost over the bent world broods . . . with ah! bright wings" (followed by fluttering of wings as "la-la"s). The image of wings connects the first and second song (based on "The Windhover"). Against a "fluttering" of background voices, soloists sing this ecstatic poem: "I caught this morning morning's minion, kingdom of daylight's dauphin . . ." The thrill of watching the bird in flight leads directly into the closing song: "Glory be to God for dappled things . . ." As in the opening song, this is triumphant music, yet tender as well. The combination of delicacy and grandeur is the essence of these poems, and of the musical settings.

God's Grandeur

Katie Beloof, Kerry Ginger, Nathan Shiu,
Lee Thompson, soloists

The world is charged with the grandeur of God.
It will flame out, like shining from shook foil;
It gathers to a greatness, like the ooze of oil
Crushed. Why do men then now not reck his rod?
Generations have trod, have trod, have trod;
And all is seared with trade; Bleared, smeared with toil;
And wears man's smudge and shares man's smell: the soil
Is bare now, nor can foot feel, being shod.
And for all this, nature is never spent;
There lives the dearest freshness deep down things;
And though the last lights off the black West went
Oh, morning, at the brown brink eastward, springs—
Because the Holy Ghost over the bent
World broods with warm breast and with ah! bright wings.

The WindHover (excerpted)

I caught this morning morning's minion, kingdom
of daylight's dauphin, dapple-dawn-drawn Falcon, in his riding
Of the rolling level underneath him steady air, and striding
High there, how he rung upon the rein of a wimpling wing
In his ecstasy! then off, off forth on swing,
As a skate's heel sweeps smooth on a bow-bend: the hurl and gliding
Rebuffed the big wind. My heart in hiding
Stirred for a bird,—the achieve of; the mastery of the thing!

Pied Beauty

Glory be to God for dappled things—
For skies of couple-colour as a brindled cow;
For rose-moles all in stipple upon trout that swim;
Fresh-firecoal chestnut-falls; finches' wings;
Landscape plotted and pieced—fold, fallow, and plough;
And all trades, their gear and tackle and trim.
All things counter, original, spare, strange;
Whatever is fickle, freckled (who knows how?)
With swift, slow; sweet, sour; adazzle, dim;
He fathers-forth whose beauty is past change:
Praise him.

AN HOUR TO DANCE (Virginia Hamilton Adair)

An Hour to Dance (1997) for SATB chorus and piano was jointly commissioned by the Whitman College Chorale and the Minneapolis Vocal Consort. These seven musical settings present an overview of the life and work of poet Virginia Hamilton Adair. From the opening "Key Ring," filled with the anticipation of life's mysteries yet-to-be-explored, to the closing "Take My Hand," expressing resignation of a life gone by, the poems grow in vitality, color and romance, and then fade into stillness, reduced color, and a vanishing of sight (by the last years of her life, Adair was blind). In its entirety, a performance of *An Hour to Dance* is intended to draw the listener into Adair's world—a world of unique poetic imagery conveying beauty and dance and personal loss. The musical language aims to reflect the poetry in focusing upon central rhythms and melodic flows inherent in the words. The aesthetic is to allow the poetry to speak through the music. Sonorities therefore range from full and colorful (in the first four poems) to increasingly sparse (in the closing poems). The poems selected for *An Hour to Dance* are all contained in the collection "Ants on the Melon," published in 1996. Permission to set the poems to music was granted directly by the poet herself.

Key Ring

When my grandfather was very old
to one small room confined
he gave me his big bunch of keys to hold.
I asked, "Do they unlock every door there is?
And what would I find inside?"
He answered, "Mysteries and more mysteries.
You can't tell till you've tried."
Then as I swung the heavy ring around
the keys made a chuckling sound.

Summary by the Pawns

First the black square, then a white,
Moved by something out of sight,
We are started with a bound,
Knights and castles all around,
Kings and queens and bishops holy!
After that we go more slowly,
While around us with free gaits
Move the taller potentates.
Still we pawns look straight ahead.
To encourage us it's said
That pawns who reach the utmost square
Are as good as monarchs there.
Meanwhile pawns, if need be, can
By slanted ways remove a man;
But frequently, before we know
What has got us, off we go!

The April Lovers

Green is happening.
Through the sweet expectant chill
Of a northern spring
We have gone without will,
Without, fear, without reason,
Trusting to the power
Of a fickle season,
Of a passionate hour,
To mature, to sustain
Till the plan uncovers
In the sun and rain
Early lovers
Never question much
What is quietly beating
Through the music and the touch
And the mouths meeting.

An Hour to Dance

For a while we whirled
over the meadow of music
our sadness put away in purses
stuffed into old shoes or shawls
the children we never were
from cellars and closets
attics and faded snapshots
came out to leap for love
on the edge of an ocean of tears
like a royal flotilla
Alicia's menagerie swam by
no tale is endless
the rabbit opened his watch
muttering late, late
time to grow
old

Slow Scythe

Slow scythe curving over the flowers
In yesterday's field where you mow,
My cool feet flicked
The dew from the daisies, hours,
Hours ago! Ages and ages ago
They flicked the dew
From the yellow and snow-colored
you leisurely mow.

White Darkness

Whether this is time or snow, passing
Through the night, earthward,
Who can tell—
Each particle only an illusion; yet
Mounting over all,
Hushing the footfall,
Silencing the bell.
"I am confused,"
Said the traveler, "hearing no sound
Though my feet touch the ground
As they are used."
Soft as a shadow on fur
The filling places
Where his footsteps were;
Lost without shape or grime
His path through the level spaces.
How can we certainly know
If this is time
Falling, or snow?

Take My Hand, Anna K.***Kerry Ginger, soloist***

My mother wept in church, Episcopalian;
Over her far-off town the sun shone bright.
Her New York City child, I felt an alien.
Coming to a crossing the train cried in the night.
My only home is in the poems I write
Who now am exiled by my failing sight.
Words vanish like a flock of birds in flight.
Coming to a crossing the train cries in the night.
Here end my tracks of passion, reason, rhyme
Before the terminal rush and roar of light,
All go together under the wheels of Time.
Coming to a crossing the train cries in the night.

THREE DAYS BY THE SEA**Three Days by the Sea**

(2004) for SATB chorus and piano was commissioned by the Key Chorale of Sarasota, Florida, in celebration of their 20th season in 2005. Three texts, by three different authors, form the basis of this choral work, united by their exploration of various aspects of the sea. "The Bottom of the Sea," from a poem by Thomas Merton titled "Song from Crossportion's Pastoral," is a product of imagination describing the ocean floor, the home of mermaids, "where waters most lock music in," a dimly-lit room where "lost orchestras play." (The orchestras play a waltz.) This song is characterized by descending lines into the depths of the piano and choral ranges. In "Gifts from the Sea," text by Anne Morrow Lindbergh, those "gifts" are those found on the beach: shells, perhaps the shell of a hermit crab, or perhaps one might also find simplicity. Patience and faith come from the sea, as evoked in the line, "One should lie empty, open, choiceless as a beach." Norah Mary Holland, a Canadian poet, cousin of W. B. Yeats, provides the lyrics for the closing song, "Down to the Sea." Here is depicted the dark, strong, passionate sea, the "waters, wild and wide." This is sustained and powerful music, with the rolling waves often portrayed in the piano accompaniment. A love and a fear of the are combined: "O strong and terrible Mother Sea, let me lie once more on your cool white breast." There is no comfort in the "dull tame face of the countryside"; thus, on life's final voyage, "I will go down to the sea again."

The Bottom of the Sea**(Thomas Merton)*****Sarah McCarthy, Lauren McCune, Roberta Gannett, soloists***

The bottom of the sea has come
And builded in my noiseless room
the fishes' and the mermaids' home,
Whose it is most, most hell to be
Out of the heavy-hanging sea
And in the thin, thin changeable air
Or unroom sleep some other where;
But play their coral violins
Where waters most lock music in:
The bottom my room, the sea.
Full of voiceless curtaindeeps
There mermaids somnambules come sleep
Where fluted half-lights show the way,
And there, there lost orchestras play
And down the many quarterlights come
To the dim mirth of my aquadrome:
The bottom of the sea, the room.