

April 2019

Music for Seven Poems

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"Music for Seven Poems" (2019). *James Hearst Documents*. 66.
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MUSIC FOR SEVEN POEMS

Complete Text

and

Program Notes

"Music for Seven Poems" was composed by William Latham for a Festival of Music at Iowa State Teachers College. The program notes in this booklet were edited by Norman Stageberg. The poems are by James Hearst and are printed with his permission.

THE POET

James Hearst has published widely in the last thirty years. His poems have appeared in such periodicals as Poetry, Furioso, Canadian Poetry Journal, and Prairie Schooner; and three volumes of poetry have come from his pen: Country Fen (1934), The Sun at Noon (1943), and Man and His Field (1951). Descended from a long line of farmers dating back to the mid-17th century in America, and a farmer himself, he draws his poetic strength from the soil and countryside of rural Iowa. His poems have the wholesome savor of outdoor things. They reveal a perceptive mind observing and reflecting upon man at work and country fields and the flora and fauna of the farmyard and roadside. They are colored by various moods--whimsical and playful, ironic and biting, somber and darksome. At times they reproduce life in concrete images; again they become symbolic and bear a universal significance. All these qualities may be noticed in the seven poems that Dr. Latham has set to music for this program. In addition to being a farmer and a poet, Mr. Hearst is also an instructor in creative writing at Iowa State Teachers College.

THE COMPOSER

Dr. William Latham has an imposing list of compositions to his credit as well as impressive performances of his work. His symphonic poem, The Lady of Shalott, was performed by the Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra in 1941. During the same year his Fantasy Concerto for Flute and Strings was broadcast over NBC. His Suite for Trumpet and String Orchestra won first prize in the National Composition Contest of Phi Nu Alpha Sinfonia in 1952, and it was played by the Eastman-Rochester Symphony Orchestra. His Symphony No. II was performed in 1955 with Thor Johnson conducting the Peninsula Music Festival Orchestra.

Dr. Latham has degrees from the University of Cincinnati, College of Music in Cincinnati, and a Ph. Degree from the Eastman School of Music. He has studied composition with Sydney C. Durst, Eugene Goossens, Herbert Elwell, and Howard Hanson. He is now an associate professor of music at Iowa State Teachers College.

THE MUSIC

as described by the composer

Music for Seven Poems was written especially for the 1958 Spring Festival of the Department of Music of Iowa State Teachers College. It was begun in the fall of 1957 and completed in March of 1958.

The work is a cantata, broadly speaking, for chorus, orchestra and soloists. The text consists of seven poems by James Hearst. They are not related in the sense that they form a plot or convey a single over-all moral conclusion or social message. They vary considerably in form, style, and mood. However, all of them have distinctly musical qualities and all are drawn from the grass roots of life in the American Midwest. I have tried to enhance the musical quality in the poetry, and in so doing I have not hesitated to use musical materials drawn from the same roots. All of the music is derived directly from the poetry: from the unexpected rhythms, from the sounds of the words, from the general mood, from the obvious symbolism, and from the more subtle allusions.

The cantata is in six separate movements, the first two of the poems having been combined in the first movement. They are arranged in an order which provides effective contrasts in mood and in tonal balance.

THE HAPPY FARMER

This farm where I live
It's poor and it's small
But I'd rather live here
Than on no farm at all.

So here's where I live
With my cow and my hens,
In a tumbledown barn
And these rickety pens.

It's true I work hard
 And the weeds they grow big,
 They smothered my corn
 And starved my poor pig.

This shiftless old barn
 Has a sieve for a roof --
 That the world it ain't perfect
 My farm is the proof.

THE PLOWBOY

I'll plow myself a pillow,
 I'll plow myself a bed,
 Time goes by like a furrow
 And soon I will be dead.

Then the field may wither,
 Then the plow may rust,
 And the gate sag on its hinges
 While I sleep because I must.

And I will not remember
 That I was tamed for this:
 To work in the yoke of summer
 For the wage of winter's kiss.

The Happy Farmer is scored for chorus and full orchestra. It is written in a simple, hymn-like style. There is a brief orchestral prelude, scored to suggest the sound of an old-fashioned reed organ (harmonium). The chorus sings the first two stanzas of "The Happy Farmer," unaccompanied. Then chorus and orchestra join in the refrain, the first eight lines of "Plowboy." After a brief interlude on the harmonium, the chorus sings the last two stanzas of "The Happy Farmer." The refrain is repeated, and then the last four lines of "Plowboy" are intoned in a solemn way suggesting the sad oblivion of death. The mood of the two poems is one which to me is beautifully portrayed in Grant Wood's portrait, "American Gothic."

THE SUPPLICANT

I try, when I awake, on a bright Sunday morning
 Slowly, slowly, to open both my eyes
 Just enough to see the clock, then sink down under
 The clear waves of rectitude, a private exercise.

There time doesn't matter and nobody calls me,
 I lie back and float on a summoning bell
 That tells the other people--not me, but other people--
 To gather up their pitchers and come to the well.

I sail into grace, half awake, half asleep,
 Like an angel from a cloud, or a turtle from the sea,
 And protect myself from evil, temptation and the devil
 By offering up a morning's rest to hard-worked men like
 me.

The Suppliant is scored for tenor solo, harp, strings and chimes. It is through-composed; that is to say, the melodic line, the sonorities and timbres derive from the meaning implicit in each line of the poem. For example, the "summoning bell" refers to a church bell, which is portrayed by two tubular chimes, F# and C#, banged at irregular intervals. Less obvious perhaps is the extension of the melodic interval of a perfect fourth, characteristic of bells, into the quartal chords of the high, divided strings. The delicate irony of the poem is made more pointed by a sanctimonious "Amen" in the low strings. The lines "and protect myself from evil" are chanted in a quasi-religious manner to depict musically the attempt to rationalize or to quiet a struggling conscience.

THE HUNTER

You can not kill the white-tailed deer
 With tears in autumn when the mellow wind
 Fingers the apples and pulls down the grapes
 One by one from the cluster, blows the frost
 On breathy mornings into a comet's shape.

You can not kill the white-tailed deer
 With kindness no matter how your hounds
 Worry them with affection, you will find
 Trails through the empty woodlands like the bare
 Patterns of their hoofprints in your mind.

You must be ruthless, hunter, and stalk them down
 From behind the trees, in covert, blind and mire
 And slaughter them one by one as the hunter's moon
 Bloodies its face with clouds of drifting fire.

The Hunter uses male chorus, low strings, horns, low brass and tympani. It is partially strophic; that is, the music for each successive stanza is in part varied. This movement is harmonically the most dissonant of the set. The color is grim, dark, and sinister. A pair of horns is used to suggest the calls of the hunt. But they are not pleasant horns; they are handled rather brutally, as indeed killing is a brutal business. The dissonant and syncopated chords in the trombones at times suggest the baying of the hounds, but not too literally. The cellos and basses, playing pizzicato, stalk stealthily through the score in well-ordered twelve-tone rows. The "trails through the empty woodlands" are conveyed by a two-part canon in the chorus, accompanied by ominous thumping on the tympani. The deer are violently slaughtered in dissonant fortissimo chords.

TRUANT

Little rowdy yellow duck, darting from your mother,
 Scooting after water bugs, scorning warmth and shelter,
 Wading in the mudbank, winking at the sun
 With your shorty ruffled rump, running helter-skelter.

Little roly poly duck, sturdy for adventure,
 Hiding in the tangled grass, diving in the middle
 Of muddy weedy water dips, wavering for balance,
 And flip-flop, somersault, tumble in puddle.

Little weary ragged duck, frightened of the shadows,
 Streak and dimple in and out, stagger home to rest.
 Oh, you droopy fuzzy head, snuggled in your pillow
 Underneath your mother's wing, safe against her breast.

Truant, scored for women's chorus, strings and woodwinds, is in complete contrast to The Hunter. It is light, fluffy, and all in fun. The basson, sometimes known as the coloratura duck, makes occasional duck-like throughout most of the score. Pizzicato strings and high woodwinds peck and chirp. "Hiding in the tangled grass" is accompanied by slithering chromatic seconds in the strings, tremolo, sul ponticello.

LOST

I hear a child crying
 as lonesome as water
 far off in the night
 sobbing low over stone.

I hear a child crying
 as lost as a kitten
 out there in the wilderness
 small and alone.

I hear a child crying
 wild and forsaken
 caught by the dark and
 no way to go home.

Lost is for solo mezzo-soprano accompanied by muted strings and harp. It is treated like an Anglo-Celtic folk song, simple and plaintive. Between the stanzas a flute and an oboe alternately "sob low over stone" to reinforce the expressive suggestiveness of the low vowel sounds.

EACH SPRING

When ducks print signs in the mud for the farmer to
 read,
 And a thawing roof yields smoke in the sun at noon,
 And a map of the earth's position shows through the
 snow,
 The news becomes music to me like a newly made tune.

When the drying fields are ready for men to plow,
 When pups tumble out of the barn like squirrels from
 a tree,
 And a schoolgirl under her breath hums the sadness of
 love,
 And plum blossoms shatter, like sap there rises in me

The excitement that comes with the promise of green-
 leaved earth,
 With another day to wonder at heart shaped flowers,
 With another moment to marvel how we are free
 From the rules of winter--the season of hope is ours.

Each Spring again uses full orchestra and chorus. The "newly made tune" in line four is interpreted as a reel or "hoedown." The opening chords are built in perfect fifths, derived from the tuning of the fiddles. The woodwinds and brasses snap syncopated figures characteristic of the reel. Fiddles saw out a tune in the manner of "Sir Roger de Coverly," "Arkansas Traveler," or "Turkey in the Straw." The banjo plinks out another strain. As if unable to resist the invitation to dance, the chorus claps in time and sings a long "Ah!" But they are overpowered by an outburst of the full orchestra. As this subsides, they sing the first stanza. After a partial return of the opening music, the chorus begins the second stanza. It is interrupted by several fitful changes of mood: "a schoolgirl....hums the sadness of love" rather sentimentally; "plum blossoms shatter" suddenly and brightly; excitement rises "like sap." In the third stanza a solo alto wonders "at heart-shaped flowers" to the accompaniment of low strings and woodwinds. A tenor marvels "how we are free from the rules of winter in a short, accompanied recitative. Then the full chorus declaims, unaccompanied, that "the season of hope is ours," after which the piece closes with a return of the opening measures.

SCATTER THE PETALS

She sleeps as if the mouths of buds,
About to utter their gentle bloom,
Suspended breath lest an echo darken
The stillness where she keeps her room

And sleeps. The warm October sunlight
Holds in its hands the troubled year's
Moments of grace, before they wither
The asters, and leaves rain down like tears.

She seems to dream in the early shadows
Where the fountain trembles, nor does she start
At the wood doves' murmur among the cedars,
Nor the tiptoe steps of my anxious heart.

I bow my head and let prayers attend her,
But heart, poor innocent, weeps to make
A shambles of hope, and tries to warn me
At the last farewell she will not wake.

James Hearst
The American Friend
October 30, 1958

SUCCESS

When I come home from work at close of day,
Blind with the sunset, faced with the evening chores,
The hungry pigs, the unmilked cows, the hens,
Restless for my attention, with feed and hay
To measure and lift, it seems the whole outdoors
Would let its need for order rest on me.
I hear the windrill's voice as I clean pens
But never the meadowlark's, a warning sign
I've meant to heed some day but never do.
Now I am old and stooped, I've come to see
That life's a mortgage no one can renew,
That each year charges interest for its use,
I've found I traded even, farm for sweat
To justify the boast, I'm master yet.
Shaky and cold under the wind's abuse
I read on the tax receipts the land is mine.

James Hearst
Poetry, August, 1958