

THE PEACEABLE KINGDOM, OCTOBER 17 at 4pm
NOTES ON THE PROGRAM

***Bar Xizam (Upward I rise)* (2007)**
Abbie Betinis

Khwajeh Shams al-Din Muhammad Hâfez-e Shirazi (ca. 1320-1390) was born in Shiraz, Persia (Iran). He wrote nearly 400 lyric poems, called *ghazals*, and is the undisputed master of that particular poetic form. His writing is mystical and based on Sufism, a tradition of Islam that is associated both with the Sunni and Shi'a denominations, as well as other currents of Islam. This particular ghazal, excerpted a bit in this setting, is written on Hâfez's tombstone.

The music has a very specific structure, moving systematically from confinement to freedom. Each singer begins on a hum, which to me depicts confinement: the desire to create something (in this case sound) without the means to see it through (to open one's mouth). Each of the four voice parts begins to explore a very small musical interval and to gradually expand it. At each soloist's cry "Bar xizam!" another voice part is "freed" and joyfully begins to sing scales and glissandi, building into a whirling invocation to the Beloved.

So much of writing music is about studying things close-up. The exact articulations, dynamics, intricacies of text setting... But as I was wondering how best to set this magnificent text to music, I found myself stepping farther and farther back from the page. I began to search for a larger compositional gesture that could paint what I was starting to envision: whole crowds of people, through the centuries even, rising up – whether in the name of religion, social justice, personal healing – all, like Hâfez, longing for something better. So I studied up on the Shepard scale, the auditory illusion of a never-ending rising scale (not unlike M.C. Escher's famous staircase, or the endlessly rising stripes on a barber pole). In one part of this piece, I've tried to recreate that illusion by overlapping a few specific series of rising glissandi, hoping that it gives the impression of these countless souls in their continuous ascent.

This piece is dedicated, with much love, to my parents, John and Emily Betinis, who continue to teach me, by their example, how to rise up.

For mixed chorus, and soprano, alto, tenor soloists, a cappella

- Abbie Betinis, June 2007

***On Photography* (1983)**
Gavin Bryars

This piece was written in 1983 as part of the work I did with Robert Wilson on his large-scale operatic project *The CIVIL WarS*, designed to be part of the opening of the 1984 Los Angeles Olympics. Although the piece was rehearsed and prepared for recording by the choir of South German Radio in Baden Baden, it was never finally performed due to the collapse of the overall project. Until 1994 the manuscript was lost - I eventually found it behind a filing cabinet as I was clearing my office having given up university teaching.

The choice of text and subject matter was mine. At the time we were working on a scene which involved imagery from Jules Verne. I knew that Verne had met Pope Leo XIII in 1884 (a hundred years before our work was due to reach fruition) and that Leo XIII had written a poem *Ars Photographica* in praise of photography (a modern subject using an archaic language, Latin) when he was still Cardinal Pecci in Perugia in 1867. As it happened, the writer Susan Sontag was considering joining the project and we spoke together several times. I knew, of course, that one of her first major books was on photography, and this led me to set Leo's text almost as a way of welcoming her on to the team. Until 1994 the manuscript was lost - I eventually found it behind a filing cabinet when clearing my office - but a setting of the text was included in my 1984 cantata *Effarene*, which rescued and reworked a number of elements from that time. Here the text is set both in Latin and in Italian translation, and the final section has a brief

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Latin epitaph. The instrumental accompaniment reflected the fact that I had then recently played the harmonium part in Rossini's *Petite Messe Solennelle*.

For mixed chorus, harmonium and piano

- Gavin Bryars

***Metamorphoses* (2010)**
David Shapiro

World Premiere

Commissioned by The Philadelphia Singers
David Hayes, Music Director

Metamorphoses, for a cappella double chorus, is a new work setting passages from book XV of Ovid's epic poem of the same title, from the year 8 A.D..

For as long as I remember I have found music that displays complex interweaving rhythmic layers to be fun and stimulating. One example is the early work of the Afro/European group Zap Mama. Others include the rhythmic ideas of composers such as Steve Reich, Elliott Carter, and Conlon Nancarrow, all of whom, in very different ways, systematically *alter* rhythmic patterns over time.

More personally, I have had reasons, over the last several years, to think a great deal about loss, and death, and change. (In this, I do not suppose myself to be unusual. I recall reading somewhere that we all secretly carry death around with us in our daily lives, and author Tananarive Due writes about carrying our sorrows in our pockets).

Out of these musical and personal preoccupations, I developed the structural idea for a new work that uses the slow alteration of rhythmic grooves as a metaphorical canvas for a piece about time and change. It was in casting about for texts to fit this idea that I found the passages in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*.

I was immediately attracted to Ovid's vivid imagery of change, such as the picture he paints of the sea encroaching upon the shore, only to have the land later grow out into the sea. I also found the remarkably simple and straightforward fashion with which he treats death to be startling, and moving. The text's very ancientness made its observations on the power of time all the more pointed. (As a side note: In other parts of Book XV, Ovid, amazingly, deals matter-of-factly with geological change in ways not fully accepted by science for more than 1800 years!)

Inevitably, once I chose the text, it immediately began to alter my original concept. And, while the Latin words stayed the same, each translation I found or fashioned changed my response to it still further. I eventually decided to set the text simultaneously in Ovid's original Latin and in English translation, to portray his dialectical depiction of change (again, for example, thinking about his images of the sea and the shore).

I would like to thank David Hayes and The Philadelphia Singers for commissioning and premiering this work this afternoon.

For a cappella double chorus, sets passages from book XV of Ovid's epic poem of the same title, from the year 8 A.D.

- David Shapiro

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***The Peaceable Kingdom* (1936)**
Randall Thompson

American composer Randall Thompson received his education at Harvard University, and also studied privately with Swiss/American composer Ernest Bloch. Thompson was equally as influential as an educator as composer in his career, producing a report in 1935 which contradicted the then-prevailing emphasis on “manual training” (including performance technique and practicing) in music education, instead suggesting a broader and more liberal approach (used in many colleges and universities today). Thompson held numerous faculty positions, directorships and chairs at renowned educational institutions, including the Curtis Institute of Music from 1939-1941; University of California, Berkeley; Princeton University and Harvard, leading to a number of commissions for his works.

Thompson’s compositional output is most recognizable for his numerous works for chorus. Many choral singers have had some performance connection in their lifetime with Thompson’s *The Testament of Freedom* (based on the writings of Thomas Jefferson), *Frostiana* (a musical homage to the poetry of Robert Frost) or *Alleluia*, the best-selling choral work in the United States in its time. *The Peaceable Kingdom* was commissioned from Thompson in 1936 by the League of Composers for the Harvard Glee Club and the Radcliffe Choral Society, conducted at the time by G. Wallace Woodworth. Thompson drew his inspiration for this piece from a painting of the same name by 19th century American folk painter (and Bucks County native) Edward Hicks, who in turn had based the painting on verses from the Biblical book of Isaiah, including the well-known texts “the wolf shall dwell with the lamb; the leopard shall lie down with the kid.” Echoing Hicks’ painting, Thompson composed a set of eight *a cappella* choruses, rooted in his appealing vocal lines and homogenous sonorities.

Thompson’s choral works reflect his strong interest in compositional devices from antiquity, especially the Renaissance motet, and this piece is no exception. Chant can be heard in the second chorus, “Woe unto them,” and parallel third writing permeates the entire work. Chords are homophonic, and the ensemble breaks into eight parts in several of the choruses, including motivic and melismatic writing recalling the Baroque era. The 18th century technique of terraced dynamics can be heard in the closing “Ye shall have a song,” often excerpted from the cantata as a stand-alone piece. Based on a verse from the thirtieth chapter of Isaiah, this eight-part chorus closed *The Peaceable Kingdom* in dramatic and triumphant C major.

- Nancy Plum