

Gwyneth Walker

Songs of Ecstasy

musical settings of the poetry of Thomas Merton
for Tenor and Organ

1. Song: “When Rain Sings Light”
2. A Psalm: “The Spirit Sings”
3. Stranger: “Thou Inward Stranger Whom I Have Never Seen”

Songs of Ecstasy

Total duration: 16'00"

SONGS OF ECSTASY are musical settings of three poems by Thomas Merton (1915-1968), a Trappist monk who lived for many years in solitude at the Abbey of Gethsemani in Kentucky. Merton's writings express an imagination sparked by divine revelation, and a soul filled with ecstatic spiritual awareness.

The poems selected for *SONGS OF ECSTASY* are all celebratory in their message. They describe God's presence in nature, in all creatures and creation, within the human spirit and in the mysterious depths of the soul.

The musical settings, while endeavoring to capture the total expression of each poem, focus upon several key words and images. For example, in the first movement, *Song: When Rain Sings Light*, the word "light" recurs many times, often prefaced by the syllable "la" leading into "light" - "la la la light." These are intended to represent specks of light. They open and close the song. Another special image is that of solitude ("with pure and solitary songs"). Thus, the very powerful words, "And speak to God, my God," are sung by the Tenor, unaccompanied, marked "ecstatic."

The second song, *Psalm*, opens with a splendid phrase, "When psalms surprise me with their music, and antiphons turn to rum, the Spirit sings." A mixed-meter rhythmic background creates a Caribbean atmosphere often associated with "rum." Later in the song, a steadily-swaying 7/8 meter is introduced with the African imagery of zebras and antelopes.

Stranger has many phrases of special interest. "One bird sits still watching the work of God" is the culmination of the previous three stanzas of poetry. And thus, the musical expression is a point of arrival in the ascent of the phrases. The music then recedes into peaceful expression until the introduction of flowing patterns which provide a background for "one cloud upon the hillside..."

The most significant contrast in this song is the change of modality, from C Mixolydian (with Bb) to C Lydian (with F#). This change occurs with the very central stanza, "Closer and clearer than any wordy master, Thou inward Stranger whom I have never seen." These words describe the Spirit of God within, perhaps mysterious and almost unknown to each of us. The use of the Lydian mode creates the "closeness" and friction of the F# against the G, presented first in the low range, and then ascending at the end. This "stranger" within creates a powerful and urgent closeness, a voice seeking to emerge. And although the music returns to the Mixolydian mode for most of the remainder of the song, the final chord (to end "Our cleanest Light is One!") expands upward to the F#/G dissonance - essential and ecstatic.

1. Song: "When Rain Sings Light"

When rain, (sings light) rain has devoured
my house
And wind wades through my trees,
The cedars fawn upon the storm with
their huge paws.
Silence is louder than a cyclone
In the rude door, my shelter.
And there I eat my air alone
With pure and solitary songs

While others sit in conference.
Their windows grieve, and soon frown
And glass begins to wrinkle with a
multitude of water
Till I no longer see their speech
And they no longer know my theater.

Rivers clothe their houses
And hide their naked wisdom.
Their conversations
go down into the deep like submarines:
Submerge them, with their pale expressions,
in my storm.

But I drink rain, drink wind
Distinguish poems,
Boiling up out of the cold forest:
Lift to the wind my eyes full of water,
My face and mind, to take their free
refreshment.

Thus I live on my own land, on my own island
And speak to God, my God,
under the doorway
When rain, (sings light) rain has
devoured my house
And winds wade through my trees.

2. A Psalm: "The Spirit Sings"

When psalms surprise me with their music
And antiphons turn to rum
The Spirit sings: the bottom drops
out of my soul!

And from the center of my cellar, Love,
louder than thunder
Opens a heaven of naked air.

New eyes awaken.
I send Love's name into the world with wings
And songs grow up around me like a jungle.
Choirs of all creatures sing the tunes
Your Spirit played in Eden.

Zebras and antelopes and birds of paradise
Shine on the face of the abyss
And I am drunk with the great wilderness
Of the sixth day in Genesis.

But sound is never half so fair
As when that music turns to air
And the universe dies of excellence.

Sun, moon and stars
Fall from their heavenly towers.
Joys walk no longer down the blue
world's shore.

Though fires loiter, lights still fly on the
air of the gulf,
All fear another wind, another thunder:
Then one more voice
Snuffs all their flares in one gust.

And I go forth with no more wine and
no more stars
And no more buds and no more Eden
And no more animals and no more sea:
While God sings by Himself in acres of night
And walls fall down, that guarded Paradise.

3. Stranger: “Thou Inward Stranger Whom I have Never Seen”

When no one listens
To the quiet trees
When no one notices
The sun in the pool

Where no one feels
The first drop of rain
Or sees the last star

Or hails the first morning
Of a giant world
Where peace begins
And rages end:

One bird sits still
Watching the work of God:
One turning leaf,
Two falling blossoms,
Ten circles upon the pond.

One cloud upon the hillside,
Two shadows in the valley
And the light strikes home.
Now dawn commands the capture
Of the tallest fortune,
The surrender
Of no less marvelous prize!

Closer and clearer
Than any wordy master,
Thou inward Stranger,
Whom I have never seen,

Deeper and cleaner
Than the clamorous ocean,
Seize up my silence
Hold me in Thy Hand!

Now act is waste
And suffering undone
Laws become prodigals
Limits are torn down
For envy has no property
And passion is none.

Look, the vast Light stands still
Our cleanest Light is One!

Dr. Gwyneth Walker (b. 1947) is a graduate of Brown University and the Hartt School of Music. She holds B.A., M.M. and D.M.A. Degrees in Music Composition. A former faculty member of the Oberlin College Conservatory, she resigned from academic employment in 1982 in order to pursue a career as a full-time composer. For nearly 30 years, she lived on a dairy farm in Braintree, Vermont. She now lives in her childhood hometown of New Canaan, Connecticut.

Gwyneth Walker has been a proud resident of Vermont. She is the recipient of the Year 2000 “Lifetime Achievement Award” from the Vermont Arts Council as well as the 2008 “Athenaeum Award for Achievement in the Arts and Humanities” from the St. Johnsbury (VT) Athenaeum.

Walker’s catalog includes over 200 commissioned works for orchestra, chamber ensembles, chorus and solo voice. The music of Gwyneth Walker is published by E. C. Schirmer of Boston (choral and vocal music) and Lauren Keiser Music (orchestral and instrumental music).

Further information concerning Gwyneth Walker and her works is available at www.gwynethwalker.com