Gwyneth Walker

Touching the Infinite Sky

for Tenor Solo, Men’s Chorus and Piano

based on the letters of John Muir
from Yosemite, California (1871-2)
Commissioned by Louisiana State University
for the Tiger Glee Club,

Trey Davis, Conductor

Premiered on October 3, 2016 – Baton Rouge, Louisiana

with Greg Gallagher, Tenor Soloist
When John Muir was a student in the University of Wisconsin, he was a frequent caller at the house of Dr. Ezra S. Carr. The kindness shown him there, and especially the sympathy which Mrs. Carr, as a botanist and a lover of nature, felt in the young man’s interests and aims, led to the formation of a lasting friendship. He regarded Mrs. Carr, indeed, as his "spiritual mother," and his letters to her in later years are the outpourings of a sensitive spirit to one whom he felt thoroughly understood and sympathized with him. These letters are therefore peculiarly revealing of their writer’s personality. Most of them were written from the Yosemite Valley, and they give a good notion of the life Muir led there, sheep-herding, guiding, and tending a sawmill at intervals to earn his daily bread, but devoting his real self to an ardent scientific study of glacial geology and a joyous and reverent communion with Nature.

About the Music

Touching the Infinite Sky is a choral adaptation (for Men’s Chorus with Tenor Soloist) of the composer’s solo song cycle, Songs from the High Sierra, for High Voice and Piano. The original songs were completed in 2014. The new work was commissioned by Louisiana State University for the Tiger Glee Club, which premiered the music on October 3, 2016 in Baton Rouge, Louisiana.

The new choral adaptation employs the additional voices as an expansive background to the soloist. As the chorus joins in the accompaniment sonorities, a sense of space and depth is created, well-suited to songs about the wilderness. The chorus also shares melodic material with the soloist, in dialogue or in unison.

Newly-composed choral introductions are inserted before the first and last songs. The texts are comprised of fragments from the songs to follow.

The five letters which provide the lyrics for the movements (adapted by the composer) were selected for their range of topics and sentiments. Some portray the wildlife in the mountains (“Glacier Birds...”). Others extol the beauty of the Sierra (“Mountain Glory,” “Yosemite Falls”). One expresses the whimsical/temperamental personality of the author (“Ice!”). And the final letter (“Sequoia”) speaks reverently of the great trees, in a language both naturalistic and sacred. They are the “greatest light in the woods, the greatest light in the world.”

The musical settings, especially in the piano accompaniment, are quite programmatic. Glacier birds scamper up and down the keyboard in tone clusters. “Icy” glissandi float off. The great trees take root in large, block chords, and waterfalls cascade down in scales.
There is personality in the letters. The bond between John Muir and Mrs. Carr (whom he addresses formally) is one of great kinship – a blending of the souls, a “spiritual romance.” As he marvels at the beauty of the wilderness, he writes ardently, “I wish that you could see this...” When he learns that Mrs. Carr, a botanist (whose plants suffer from the frost), dislikes ice, he chides her, and creates a “mock argument” over the value of glacial ice.

The songs begin with an ascent into the mountains. They close with the return to the coast, to the magnificent Sequoia trees, where John Muir camps for the night, in the company of a squirrel. Charmingly, he writes “therefore, my Carr, goodnight.”

**The Letters**

**Introduction to #1**

Touching the infinite sky...
the glaciers and the summit...
following the coast ranges...
the cascades and the forest–
my mountain life...
my soul reaching into heaven blue, the infinite sky!

Ah! The whisper of ice and snow...
the glory of Yosemite...
the purest creation I ever beheld...
the night moon glory...

King Sequoia, the greatest light in the world!
The rays of heaven...
I wish that you could see this...

**1. Ascent: “Glacier Birds and Other Companions”**

[Yosemite Valley, August 5th, 1872]

Dear Mrs. Carr:

Your letter telling me to catch my best glacier birds, and come to you and the coast mountains, only makes me the more anxious to see you, and if you cannot come up, I will have to come down, if only for a talk. My birds are flying everywhere, into all mountains and plains, of all climes and times, and some are ducks in the sea, and I scarce know what to do about it. I must see the coast ranges, but I was thinking that I would hide in Yosemite and write; I would hike back among the glaciers of the summits, and be ready to catch any whisper of ice and snow.

You sense all the bends and falls and rapids and cascades of my mountain life – you know that my companions are those who live with me in the same sky, whether in reach of hand or spirit. I am learning to live close to the lives of my friends without ever seeing them. No miles of any measurement can separate your soul from mine.
2. “Glory in the Mountains”  
[Yosemite 1871]

“The Spirit” has led me into the wilderness, and I am once more in the glory of the Yosemite. I am filled with visions of snowy forests of the pine and spruce, and of mountain spires beyond, pearly and half transparent, reaching into heaven blue not purer than themselves.

I wish that you could see the edge of the snow-cloud which hovered, so soothingly, discharging its heaven-begotten snows with such unmistakable gentleness and love, moving from pine to pine, as if bestowing blessings upon each. I wish that you could see this.

In a few hours, we climbed into a glorious storm-cloud. What a harvest of crystal flowers, and the wind song. We could not see before us in the storm, but as I was familiar with the general map of the mountain, we had no difficulty in finding our way.

I went out to watch the coming of the dark – most impressively sublime. Next morning was every way the purest creation I ever beheld!

3. “Yosemite Falls”  
[Midnight, April 3, 1871, Yosemite]

O Mrs. Carr, that you could be here to mingle in this night moon glory! I am in the Upper Yosemite Falls, and can hardly calm to write, but, you have been so present in my thought.

In the afternoon, I came up to the mountain, with a blanket and a piece of bread, to spend the night in prayer among the spouts of the Fall. I can only wish again that you would expose your soul to the rays of this heaven.

Silver from the moon lights this glorious creation which we name the Falls, and has laid a double rainbow at its base. O the music that is blessing me now! The grandest notes of the yearly anthem. They echo every fiber of me.

I am going to stop here until morning, and pray a whole blessed night with the Falls and the moon.

4. “Ice!”  
[Yosemite, December 11, 1871]

Ice!

So, you dislike ice!!

But glaciers, dear friend – ice is only another form of terrestrial love. I am astonished to hear you speak so unbelievably of God’s glorious crystal glaciers. “They are only pests,” you say, and you think them “wrong in temperature,” and they lived in “horrible times,” and you don’t care to hear about them.
You confuse me. You have taught me here and encouraged me to read the mountains. Now you will not listen. **Next summer you will be converted – you will be iced then.**

I have been up Nevada to the top of Lyell and found a living glacier; (but you don’t want that) and I have been in the canyon above, and I was going to tell you the beauty there; (but it is all ice-born beauty, and too cold for you) and I was going to tell about the making of the South Dome; (but ice did that too) and about the hundred lakes that I found; (but the ice made them, every one) and I had some groves to speak about – groves of surpassing loveliness in new pathless Yosemite; (but they all grew upon glacial drift – and I have nothing to send but what is frozen or freezable).

Glaciers came down from heaven, they were angels with folded wings, white wings of snowy bloom. Locked hand in hand, the little spirits did nobly; they were willing messengers to whom God spoke “well done” from heaven, calling them back to their homes in the sky.

**Next summer you will be converted – you will be iced then!**

---

**Introduction to 5. Descent: “Sequoia”**

Behold the King in his glory!
Behold the King Sequoia!
Majestic!

The King of Heaven!
The greatest light in the world!
Reaching into heaven blue, the infinite sky!
Behold!

---

**5. Descent: “Sequoia”**

[Squirrelville, Sequoia County Nut Time]

Behold the King in his glory, King Sequoia! Behold! Behold! Behold! Some time ago I left for Sequoia, and have been at his feet; fasting and praying for light. For is he not the greatest light in the woods? And is he not the greatest light in the world? Where are such columns of sunshine brought to earth?

See Sequoia reaching for the skies, every summit modeled in curves, as if pressed into unseen moulds, warm in the amber sun. How truly Godful in stature! Today, King Sequoia bowed down to me down in the grove as I stood gazing. Behold the King in his glory, King Sequoia!

The sun is set and the star candles are lit to show me the way – little Douglas squirrel and I off to bed. Therefore, my Carr, goodnight. You ask, “When are you coming down?” Ask the Lord – Lord Sequoia! Behold!
The Composer

Widely performed throughout the country, the music of American composer **Gwyneth Walker** is beloved by performers and audiences alike for its energy, beauty, reverence, drama, and humor. 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 divides her time between her childhood hometown of New Canaan, Connecticut and the musical communities of Sarasota, Florida and Randolph, Vermont.

Gwyneth Walker has been a proud resident of Vermont for many years. 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. In 2012, she was elected as a Fellow of the Vermont Academy of Arts and Sciences.

Walker’s catalog includes over 300 commissioned works for orchestra, chamber ensembles, chorus, and solo voice. A special interest has been dramatic works that combine music with readings, acting, and movement. The music of Gwyneth Walker is published by E. C. Schirmer (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

Table of Contents

Introduction 1

1. Ascent: “Glacier Birds and Other Companions” 4

2. “Glory in the Mountains” 11

3. “Yosemite Falls” 21

4. “Ice!” 28

Introduction to Descent: “Sequoia” 41

5. Descent: “Sequoia” 42
Touching the Infinite Sky
for Tenor Solo, Men's Chorus and Piano

Gwyneth Walker

Introduction

Recited on pitch

Tenor 1

Tenor 2

Bass 1

Bass 2

Touching the infinite sky... the glaciers and the summit... following the coast ranges... the

4

T1

T2

cas-cades and the for- est- my moun-tain life...

rit.

B1

B2

cas-cades and the for- est- my moun-tain life...

my

soul...

my soul...

my soul...

my soul...

my soul...

Note setting and format by Gwyneth Walker Music Productions

© Copyright 2016 by E. C. Schirmer Music Company, Inc.,
a division of ECS Publishing. www.ecspublishing.com
All rights reserved.
As before

With motion

The whisper of ice and snow... the glory of Yosemite...

The purest creation I ever beheld... the night moon glory...

The greatest light in the world! The rays, the...

Walker | Touching the Infinite Sky | Introduction
I wish that you could see this...

(a few voices)

rays of heaven...

(a few voices)

rays of heaven...
1. Ascent: “Glacier Birds and Other Companions”
[Yosemite Valley, August 5th, 1872]

Soloist steps forward to sing

Tempo ad libitum

playfully,
as birds hopping across a glacier
ascending black-note clusters

just a few birds
very high

Dear Mrs._ Carr:
Your letter telling me to catch my best
glacier birds, and come to you and the coast mountains,
only makes me the more

anxious to see you,

as a little bird in the distance

stop

(Walker | Touching the Infinite Sky | 1. Ascent)
will have to come down, if only for a talk.

My birds are flying everywhere,

in to all mountains and plains,

Ah,

Ah,
and some are ducks in the sea, and I

and some are ducks in the sea,

Grandly

and some are ducks in the sea,
would see the coast ranges, but I was thinking I would hide in Yon--

locally and write.

I would hike back among the

Hm,

with excitement

and be ready to catch any

Ah,

and be ready to catch any

Ah,

and be ready to catch any

simile

Walker | Touching the Infinite Sky | 1. Ascent
whisper of ice and snow.

You sense all the bends and falls and rapids and cascades of my mountain life you
friends without ever seeing them.

Ah,

Ah,

seeing them.

No

miles of any measurement can separate your soul from mine.

(ringing)

Tempo ad libitum
playfully,
as birds hopping across a glacier
ascending black-note clusters
faster, scurrying higher
just a few birds very high

Singer looks over at the pianist, as if seeing one last glacier bird.

2'45"
2. “Glory in the Mountains”  
[Yosemite, 1871]

With motion $\frac{3}{8} = 92$, but not rushed

(the grandeur of the mountains)

With much pedal

[Soloist may rest]

mf with reverence for the wilderness

“The Spir-it” has led me into the wil-der-ness,

unis. mf with reverence for the wilderness

“The Spir-it” has led me into the wil-der-ness,
and I am once more in the glory of Yosemite.

I am filled with visions of snowy forests of the

[Soloist joins in]

[Soloist may rest]
Ah,

par ent,

reach ing in - to hea ven blue,

not pur er than them-
as a waterfall in the mountains

I wish that you could see the edge of the

gentle, quivering tremoli

snow cloud which hovered, so soothingly, dist -
charging its heaven begotten snow with such unmistakable gentleness and love,

moving from pine to pine, as if bestowing blessings upon

Slightly slower, grandly

poco rit.

---

Walker | Touching the Infinite Sky | 2. Glory in the Mountains
I wish that you could see this...

In a few hours we...

Ah,

ascending the mountain

a tempo \( (q = 96) \)
climbed into a glorious storm cloud.

Ah,

What a harvest of crystal
flowers, and the wind song.

Ah, blurred tremolo, as if blinded in a storm

we would not see before us in the storm, but as I was familiar with the general map of the mountain,

we had no difficulty in finding our way.
pur - est cre - a - tion— I ev - er be - held!

Ah, I ev - er be - held!

Slowly, grandly

Slowly, grandly

Walker | Touching the Infinite Sky | 2. Glory in the Mountains
3. “Yosemite Falls”

[Midnight, April 3, 1871, Yosemite]

Flowing $\frac{\dot{j}}{\dot{j}} = 108$

unis. $p$

Ah,

as a waterfall

$fn$

Ah,

you could be here to mingle in this night moon glory

Walker | Touching the Infinite Sky | 3. Yosemite Falls
Every!

Upper Yosemite Falls, and can hardly calm myself to

Ah,
### 3. Yosemite Falls

**poco rit.**

**Slower, quasi recitative**

*write, but you have been so present in my thought.*

**Slower, quasi recitative**

*In the afternoon, I came up to the mountain.*

**a tempo (q = 108)**

**mf** with excitement and anticipation

*Ah.*

**a tempo (q = 108)**

*gentle tremolo, with excitement and anticipation*
with a blanket and a piece of bread, to spend the night in prayer.

Ah,

among the spouts of the Fall. I can only

Ah,

Ah,

poco rit. Slower

poco rit. Slower

wish again that you would expose your soul to the rays.

Walker | Touching the Infinite Sky | 3. Yosemite Falls
of this heaven.

ecstatic

Silver from the
bles sing me now! The grand-est notes of the year-ly an-them! They

ech-o ev-er-y fi-ber of me. I am going to stop here

un-til morn-ing, and pray a whole bles-sed night with the Falls and the moon.

a tempo

a tempo gently, as moonlight

Walker | Touching the Infinite Sky | 3. Yosemite Falls
4. “Ice!”

[Yosemite, December 11, 1871]

(in which the author has a disagreement with Mrs. Carr!)

Quickly, as brittle ice

a black-note cluster followed by a white-note (upward) glissando

(ascending)

Singer (may wish to step forward to the audience)
spoken loudly, with disgust and disbelief
(tempered with affection), directed at Mrs. Carr.

“Ice! So you dislike ice!!!”

Singer resumes normal stage position

Quickly \( \text{\textit{j} = 120}, \text{ice crystals} \)

But glaciers, dear friend—

Walker | Touching the Infinite Sky | 4. “Ice!”
ice is only another form of terrestrial love.

I am astonished to hear you speak so unbelievably of...

God’s glorious crystal glaciers.

slight pedal, as before
“They are only pests,” you say, and you think them

Chorus claps (as if swatting a fly)

“Wrong in temperature,” and they lived in “horrible times,”

(for rehearsal only)

(as an aside)  

You do not care to hear about them.

You converted

p
gentle tremolo, to portray confusion

Walker | Touching the Infinite Sky | 4. “Ice!”
fuse me. You have taught me here and encouraged me to read the

mountains. Now you will not listen.

Chorus shouts

NO! NO! NO! NO!

NO! NO! NO! NO!

Next summer you will be converted – you will be iced then.

playfully

Free measure: (Singer steps forward, to tease Mrs. Carr)
Resume normal stage position

34

\( a \text{ tempo } (q = 120) \)

\( f \text{ ecstatic} \)

I have been up Ne-

37

va da to the top of Ly ell and found a
The Singer dismissively cuts off the chorus (as an aside)

40

f ecstatic, with disdain

42

I have been in the canyon above, and I was going to tell you the

The Singer dismissively cuts off the chorus (as an aside)

40

f ecstatic, with disdain

42

I have been in the canyon above, and I was going to tell you the
beauty there; (but it is all ice-born beauty, and too cold for you) I was going to tell about the making of the South Dome; (but ice did that too) and about the

*This alternation between ecstatic love of glaciers and disdain for Mrs. Carr’s dislike of ice continues through m. 56.

Walker | Touching the Infinite Sky | 4. “Ice!”
hundred lakes that I found; (but the ice made them, every one) and I had some

ah,

ah,

groves to speak about, groves of surpassing
love-li-ness in new path-less Yo-sem-i-te;

ah,

ah,

(but they all grew and I have noth-ing to send but what is fro-zen or freez-a-ble).
57  
\[a \text{ tempo (} \frac{\text{j}}{\text{}} = 120)\]

59  
\[m_f \text{ glowing, affectionately}\]

61  
\[\text{angels with folded wings, white wings of snowy bloom.}\]

64  
\[\text{lightly}\]

Walker | Touching the Infinite Sky | 4. “Ice!”
they were willing messengers to whom

God spoke “well done” from heaven,

calling them back to their homes in the
Next summer you will be converted— you will be iced then!

(Chorus shivers!)

playfully

short black-note cluster to white-note cluster tremolo

very high

3'45"
Introduction

to Descent: “Sequoia”

At a stately tempo $\frac{d}{d} = 92$

At a stately tempo $\frac{d}{d} = 92$

---

Walker | Touching the Infinite Sky | 5. Descent: “Sequoia”
5. Descent: “Sequoia”
[Squirrelville, Sequoia County Nut Time]
Sequoia! Sequoia!

Sequoia! Sequoia!

Sequoia! Sequoia!

Sequoia! Sequoia!

-- -- --

Sequoia! Sequoia!

Sequoia! Sequoia!

Sequoia! Sequoia!

Sequoia! Sequoia!

Sequoia! Sequoia!

Sequoia! Sequoia!

Be hold the King in his glory, King Se -

Be hold! Be hold! Be hold!
Some time ago I left for Sequoia, and have been at his feet; fasting and praying for light. For is he not the greatest

Slightly faster $\frac{4}{4} = 100$, with motion

Walker | Touching the Infinite Sky | 5. Descent: “Sequoia”
light in the woods? And is he not the greatest light in the world?

Where are such columns of sunshine brought to
28

earth?

a tempo (\( \text{♩} = 100 \))

p with excitement and wonderment

31 unis.

See Sequoia reaching for the skies, every

summit modeled in curves, as if pressed into unseen

Walker | Touching the Infinite Sky | 5. Descent: “Sequoia”
Slowly, triumphantly

warm in the amber sun. How truly moulds, warm in the amber sun.

how truly Godful in stature! To -

how truly Godful in stature!
day King Se-quo-ia bowed down to me in the grove as I stood gazing.

unobtrusive

---

Behold the King in his glory, King Se-quo-ia!

---

Faster \( \text{l} = 108 \)
54 \( \text{a tempo } (\mathbf{d} = 108) \)

\( \text{p gently} \)

57 \( \text{p gently, as night approaches} \)

The sun is set and the star candles are

60 \( \text{lit to show me the way—} \)

Lit - tle Doug - las *squirrel and

63 \( \text{off to bed.} \)

There - fore, my

More relaxed \( \mathbf{d} = 100 \)

Walker | Touching the Infinite Sky | 5. Descent: “Sequoia”

*a reference to the Douglas fir, the home of the squirrel!
Lord Sequoia!

Be hold!

O, be hold, O be hold!

O, be hold, O be hold!

O, be hold, O be hold!

O, be hold, O be hold!

O, be hold, O be hold!

O, be hold, O be hold!

O, be hold, O be hold!

O, be hold, O be hold!

O, be hold, O be hold!

O, be hold, O be hold!

O, be hold, O be hold!

O, be hold, O be hold!

O, be hold, O be hold!

O, be hold, O be hold!

O, be hold, O be hold!

O, be hold, O be hold!

O, be hold, O be hold!

O, be hold, O be hold!

O, be hold, O be hold!

O, be hold, O be hold!

O, be hold, O be hold!

O, be hold, O be hold!

O, be hold, O be hold!

O, be hold, O be hold!

O, be hold, O be hold!

O, be hold, O be hold!

O, be hold, O be hold!

O, be hold, O be hold!

O, be hold, O be hold!

O, be hold, O be hold!

O, be hold, O be hold!

O, be hold, O be hold!

O, be hold, O be hold!

O, be hold, O be hold!

O, be hold, O be hold!

O, be hold, O be hold!

O, be hold, O be hold!

O, be hold, O be hold!

O, be hold, O be hold!

O, be hold, O be hold!

O, be hold, O be hold!

O, be hold, O be hold!

O, be hold, O be hold!

O, be hold, O be hold!

O, be hold, O be hold!

O, be hold, O be hold!

O, be hold, O be hold!

O, be hold, O be hold!

O, be hold, O be hold!

O, be hold, O be hold!

O, be hold, O be hold!

O, be hold, O be hold!

O, be hold, O be hold!

O, be hold, O be hold!

O, be hold, O be hold!

O, be hold, O be hold!

O, be hold, O be hold!

O, be hold, O be hold!

O, be hold, O be hold!

O, be hold, O be hold!

O, be hold, O be hold!

O, be hold, O be hold!

O, be hold, O be hold!

O, be hold, O be hold!

O, be hold, O be hold!

O, be hold, O be hold!

O, be hold, O be hold!

O, be hold, O be hold!

O, be hold, O be hold!

O, be hold, O be hold!

O, be hold, O be hold!

O, be hold, O be hold!

O, be hold, O be hold!

O, be hold, O be hold!

O, be hold, O be hold!

O, be hold, O be hold!

O, be hold, O be hold!

O, be hold, O be hold!

O, be hold, O be hold!

O, be hold, O be hold!

O, be hold, O be hold!

O, be hold, O be hold!

O, be hold, O be hold!

O, be hold, O be hold!

O, be hold, O be hold!

O, be hold, O be hold!

O, be hold, O be hold!

O, be hold, O be hold!

O, be hold, O be hold!

O, be hold, O be hold!

O, be hold, O be hold!

O, be hold, O be hold!

O, be hold, O be hold!

O, be hold, O be hold!

O, be hold, O be hold!

O, be hold, O be hold!

O, be hold, O be hold!

O, be hold, O be hold!

O, be hold, O be hold!

O, be hold, O be hold!

O, be hold, O be hold!

O, be hold, O be hold!

O, be hold, O be hold!

O, be hold, O be hold!

O, be hold, O be hold!

O, be hold, O be hold!

O, be hold, O be hold!

O, be hold, O be hold!

O, be hold, O be hold!

O, be hold, O be hold!

O, be hold, O be hold!

O, be hold, O be hold!

O, be hold, O be hold!

O, be hold, O be hold!

O, be hold, O be hold!

O, be hold, O be hold!

O, be hold, O be hold!

O, be hold, O be hold!

O, be hold, O be hold!
ritard. to end

hold! Be - hold!

(cresc.)

hold!

(cresc.)

ritard. to end

(Cresc.)

loc

3’15”
Total duration: 22’
This version completed:
May 20, 2016
New Canaan, Connecticut