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JAKE RUNESTAD, AN AMERICAN TRIPTYCH: A CONDUCTOR’S GUIDE

A Dissertation

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the Louisiana State University and Agricultural and Mechanical College in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Musical Arts

in

The School of Music

by

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ABSTRACT

Jake Runestad is a fresh voice within the new wave of successful twenty-first century American choral composers. Among the growing number of very popular works within his expanding opus, Runestad has compiled three of his independently conceived compositions into a cycle he titles, *American Triptych*. The determination to group these works together in a cycle, *Reflections* (2016), *The Piece of Wild Things* (2013), and *Come to the Woods* (2015), was largely based on a common textual thread since all three authors are naturalist writers – Henry David Thoreau, Wendell Berry, and John Muir.

All three are written for SATB chorus and piano and were first recorded as a Triptych by Craig Hella Johnson and *Conspirare* on their album, *The Hope of Loving*. The first three chapters provide a textual/musical analysis, and the final chapter addresses performance practice issues for the conductor, pianist and singers. The purpose of this research project is to provide a performance guide for prospective conductors and to offer greater exposure of the work to the global choral community.
INTRODUCTION

Jake Runestad is, perhaps, one of the most prolific American choral composers of the first two decades of the twenty-first century. He is an award-winning artist and he earned a 2020 Grammy nomination. He composes works for orchestra, wind band, chorus, chamber ensembles, and opera. His creative output is impressive considering his level of engagement with commissions, residencies, workshops, and lectures. Due to this, the Chicago Tribune considers him to be, “one of the best of the younger American composers.”

Throughout his career as a composer, Runestad has received several commissions from different choirs and conductors around the country. Among these works, The Peace of Wild Things (2013), with text by Wendell Berry, from New Collected Poems, commissioned by the Young New Yorkers’ Chorus, Michael Kerschner, conductor; Come to the Woods (2015), with text from writings by John Muir, and adapted by the composer, commissioned by Conspirare, Craig Hella Johnson, conductor; and Reflections (2016), with text taken from journal writings by Henry David Thoreau, and also adapted by the composer, commissioned by the Santa Fe Desert Chorale, Joshua Habermann, conductor. In 2017, Runestad decided to combine these three pieces into the American Triptych.

A straightforward analysis could lead one to the obvious conclusion that Runestad combined these three pieces because they were all written for SSAATTBB choir with piano; because they are all for an advanced choir; and

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because they are all for a very skilled pianist. However, a more careful analysis suggests there is more beneath the surface, that the texts are also connected in a way that causes each song’s message to complement the other two. The three pieces tell a story. In Reflections, one is confronted with the existential exuberance of nature. In The Peace of Wild Things, one takes a deep breath, lying down to experience the freedom of nature for a glimpse of time. In Come to the Woods, one is transformed by the elemental power of nature.

All three naturalist writers share a common view of the transformative power of nature to return humankind to an existential relationship as co-creations. The author attempts to discuss each of the texts and ways in which the music enhances the words, images, and meanings. Following is a musical analysis of the work, with the intent to provide a conductor’s guide to this American Triptych. The purpose of this document is to offer justification for the collection of these three works into a cycle and, hopefully, offer substantiation for this cycle to be included among the best choral cycles of our early twenty-first century.

According to the composer, “'American Triptych’ is a collection of three works that, though written separately, can be combined for a three-movement, extended work for chorus and piano. ... Each movement expresses an aspect of our human connection with the natural world and journeys through a rushing river, a peaceful lakefront, and a wind-storm in the Western Sierra mountains.”

Chapters one through three present information about the writers, and how Runestad wrote his music based on the text. This information will come from

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biographical books about the writers, the composer’s website, and a personal interview that was conducted by the author.

These chapters also contain a musical analysis of the *American Triptych*. This analysis will examine the formal structure, melodies, harmonies, and vocal and piano writing. The method utilized to analyze each movement is the Julius Herford method of bar analysis.³

Chapter four focuses on practical considerations for choral conductors who intend to rehearse and perform the cycle. This chapter includes rehearsal/performance conducting issues along with some interpretative suggestions. A discussion about collective and independent performances of the works, as well as considerations for the performing order are also noted.

CHAPTER ONE. REFLECTIONS

“We live but a fraction of our life.  
We do not fill all our pores with our blood;  
We do not inspire and expire fully and entirely enough,  
So that the wave of each inspiration  
Shall break on our farthest shores,  
Rolling 'til it meets the sand which bounds us,  
And the sound of the surf comes back [to us].  
Why do we not let on the flood,  
Raise the gates,  
And set all our wheels in motion?

There is the calmness of the lake  
When there is not a breath of wind;  
So it is with us.  
Sometimes we are clarified and calmed  
As we never were before.  
We become like a still lake of purest crystal  
And without an effort  
Our depths are revealed to ourselves.  
All the world goes by us  
And is reflected in our deeps.  
Such clarity  
Obtained by such pure means!  
By simple living,  
By honesty of purpose.  
To be calm, to be serene!”

Mary David Thoreau (1817-1862) was an American transcendentalist. In 1960, he was elected to the Hall of Fame for Great Americans at New York University and his effigy took its place in the pantheon of national heroes. During his lifetime, he was mentored by Ralph Waldo Emerson, who published his writings

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in *The Dial*, an American magazine published quarterly from 1840 to 1929, which served as the chief publication of the Transcendentalists.⁶

Jake Runestad affirms that he had access to excerpts from Thoreau’s journals, and he took notes for use in a future project that was ultimately realized by the commission from the Santa Fe Desert Chorale. Usually, Runestad starts composing with the words, but this piece first started with the first measure of the piano part. He said that he was at a friend’s place, and while sitting at the piano, came up with the opening figure. According to him, that piano accompaniment evokes the energy of rushing water.⁷

**Example 1.1.** First measure of *Reflections*, by Jake Runestad. Piano part.

![Example 1.1](image)

According to Runestad, he often sings the words to feel their musicality before writing the notes. So, the text must always be the first priority while performing his pieces. In this case, he took notes from Thoreau’s journal, selected some parts of it, reorganized the ideas, and divided the text into two stanzas. According to his personal notes, the first part reflects the exterior (image), and the

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⁷ Jake Runestad, interview by author, December 2020.
second part reflects the interior (reflection). He wrote a subtitle for each section: the first one is called, “Let On the Flood,” and the second one is, “Reflections.”

For Reflections, Jake Runestad chose “the image of water as the sonic and visual inspiration.” The interval of a perfect fifth is the prominent musical motive. The perfect fifth is “an interval of stability, ‘groundedness,’ and peace.”

The figure of reflection is very clear in the first measures of upper voices: first sopranos and first altos sing parallel fifths, as do the second sopranos and second altos. Alternating sopranos and altos evoke the sound of waves of water. The listener hears four pitches, G, A, D, E, but with the movement and fluidity of the water.

**Example 1.2.** First two measures of Reflections, by Jake Runestad. Upper voices.

The piano and upper voices work together with two simultaneous intervals of a perfect fifth in a descending progression, but with different rhythms. This

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progression is gradual. It starts at measure 4, and in every measure, one of the two fifths goes down a whole step, creating two symmetrical whole tone scales. This generates, in the even measures, a perfect major seventh chord. The two sequences are: two perfect fifths going down in a whole tone scale starting and finishing with G, D and A, E, and perfect major seventh chords also going down in a whole tone scale starting on Fmaj7 and ending on Gmaj7.

In the first part of the piece, Runestad sets the words in the lower voices, first in parallel thirds (“We live but a fraction of our life. We do not fill all our pores with our blood.”), then in an imitative figure (“We do not inspire and expire fully and entirely enough. So that the wave of each inspiration shall break…”) and back in parallel thirds (“…on the farthest shores.”).

**Example 1.3.** First 3 measures of *Reflections*, by Jake Runestad. Lower voices.
Example 1.4. Measures 7-10 of Reflections, by Jake Runestad. Lower voices part.

In this passage, Runestad carefully crafts the rhythms to the natural speech inflection.

“Shores” is the word to which Runestad gives more emphasis in this first section as it is the only word that the upper voices sing. When we first hear it in the lower voices, two new elements are added to the piano accompaniment: a pedal tone on low D, and a high melody, which has to be played with the left hand, since the right hand is still playing the same figure heard at the beginning. The high melody is a beautiful text painting possibly describing the wave of each inspiration breaking on the farthest shores.

Now the lower voices sing in parallel thirds the words, “Rolling ‘til it meets the sand which bounds us, and the sound of the surf comes back to us.” The upper voices emulate the breaking of the waves on the shores with a little ornament in first sopranos and first altos; the harmony switches to E♭maj9, and an ascending scale sounds in the low register of the piano, while we still hear the low pedal, the high melody, and the initial figure that evokes waves meeting the sand.
Subsequently, the first phrase is heard again, beginning in unison, but with the whole choir, to set a calmer pace. This moment of serenity is interrupted by two cluster chords on the same pitches heard on measure one (D, E, A, B; and A, D, E, C sharp), and an ascending scale from the piano in a new tempo; we hear sopranos, altos, and tenors singing the word “motion” in an ascending glissando. The motion is represented by a trill on the right hand of the piano, while the left hand plays small sections of the ascending scale. The second altos sustain a pedal tone, while the other three upper sections, one at a time, sing the word “motion” in an ascending glissando. With all this harmonic inconsistency, the lower voices sing, “Why do we not let on the flood, raise the gates, and set all our wheels in motion?”

Freely, suspended $\approx 120$

```
S
28 f
life. Mo - tion.

A
28 f
life. Mo - tion.*

T
28 f
Why do we not let on the

B
28 f
Why do we not let on the

Pno.
28 f
keep sus. pedal down through m. 36.

*Close to "n."
```
Then the upper voices join them in the word “motion” on a bright E major chord, while the piano plays a sequence of perfect fifths. Some of the previous elements are reflected in this piano accompaniment.

**Example 1.8.** Measures 35-38 of *Reflections*, by Jake Runestad.
The opening line is compacted into motivic fragments ("We live but a fraction of our life."). The piano shows motion through a large sequence of trilled perfect fifths. After two measures on the word “life,” Runestad brings back the reassuring E major in the piano. The composer re-articulates the first phrase, but when it starts building that motive, it suddenly stops. This work is clearly divided into two sections: measures 1 to 50 and measures 51 to 103.

The second section opens with a piano interlude featuring a set of disparate sequences of perfect fifths moving in contrary motion, like reflections on a mirror, from extremes in ranges toward the center. The score says, “serene, freely,” and, “delicately, like still water,” and it is much slower than the previous section. Runestad is already text painting before incorporating the text.

**Example 1.9.** Measures 51-55 of *Reflections*, by Jake Runestad.

After this interlude, the upper voices have a beautiful mirroring (in contrary motion) melody on the words, “There is the calmness of the lake when there is not a breath of wind.” This is a beautiful example of text painting. As the upper voices sing this text, the piano sustains the two pitches; when singers breathe, the piano again plays perfect fifths in contrary motion. The calmness of the lake is reflected in the accompaniment. The lower voices join them in unison to sing, “so it is with us.” On the last word, the unison opens into a simple chord of fifths, while the piano
plays a broken chord of perfect fifths starting on low D and going up to C sharp.

The choir sings the middle notes, as if it is embraced by the piano arpeggio.

**Example 1.10. Measures 56-63 of Reflections, by Jake Runestad.**

Following two measures of arpeggios, the sopranos and tenors sing the next phrase, also in a mirroring melody, with the altos sustaining a pedal tone while the piano continues playing arpeggios. It gives the listener the false sensation that this
section is in D major. The text is, “Sometimes we are clarified and calmed as we never were before. We become like a still lake of purest crystal and without an effort our depths are revealed for ourselves.” The texture shifts to homophony with the words, “All the world goes by us and is reflected in our deeps. Such clarity! Obtained by such pure means,” reflecting a united world. The composer paints the words, “and is reflected,” with a mirroring melody, with the sopranos and tenors in octaves, and the altos and basses also in octaves. It is interesting that the lowest note the bass section sings in this piece is on the word “deeps,” anchoring another chord of ascending perfect fifths.

Example 1.11. Measures 76-78 of Reflections, by Jake Runestad.

In the final lines of text, the vocal lines come closer together as they sing, “By simple living, by honesty of purpose.” A little reminiscence of the beginning is heard, in bocca chiusa. The choir sings in unison the last two phrases, “to be calm”
and “to be serene.” The choir closes with a humming in unison, while the piano plays a simplified version of the interlude previously shown in Example 1.9. Runestad is scaling down the texture in these final measures to reflect the movement toward the values expressed by Thoreau in the end of the lyrics, such as clarity, simplicity, honesty of purpose, calmness, and serenity. While the piano plays mirroring perfect fifths, the choir holds the fifth of the chord in _bocca chiusa_.

**Example 1.12.** Measures 94-103 of *Reflections*, by Jake Runestad.
**Table 1. Herford Bar Analysis: Reflections – Jake Runestad**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Measures</th>
<th>No. of Measures</th>
<th>Characteristics</th>
<th>Text</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1-15</td>
<td>15 (7+8)</td>
<td>Sequence of descending perfect fifths on piano and upper voices; lower voices sing the text.</td>
<td>“We live but a fraction of our life. We do not fill all our pores with our blood; we do not inspire and expire fully and entirely enough, so that the wave of each inspiration shall break on the farthest…”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16-27</td>
<td>12 (4+6+2)</td>
<td>Low pitch plus high melody added on piano; upper voices vocalizes a new motif; ascending scale in the low register of the piano; choir sings the last part in unison in the tonal area of C major.</td>
<td>“Shores. Rolling ‘till it meets the sand which bounds us, and the sound of the surf comes back to us. We live but a fraction of our…”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>29-35</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>Trill in the high register of piano; upper voices builds a whole tone scale with ascending glissando; lower voices sing the text.</td>
<td>“…life. Motion. Why do we not let on the flood, raise the gates, and set all our wheels in motion?”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>36-50</td>
<td>15 (3+4+4+4)</td>
<td>Tonal area of E major; piano has sequences of perfect fifths; choir sings the opening phrase in motivic fragments.</td>
<td>“We live but a fraction of our life.”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(table cont’d.)
### Section 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Measures</th>
<th>No. of Measures</th>
<th>Characteristics</th>
<th>Text</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>51-73</td>
<td>23 (5+5+3+10)</td>
<td>Melodies in contrary motion (&quot;mirroring&quot;); sopranos in duets with altos and subsequently with tenors; piano plays arpeggios of perfect fifths; tonal area of D major, which modulates to F major, and from there, chromatically up until A flat major.</td>
<td>“There is the calmness of the lake when there is not a breath of wind; so it is with us. Sometimes we are clarified and calmed as we never were before. We become like a still lake of purest crystal and without an effort our depths are revealed to ourselves.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>74-89</td>
<td>16 (5+5+6)</td>
<td>Piano becomes more agitated rhythmically, and suddenly calmer; the choir sings the mirroring melodies; the sense of tonality goes back to D major but not for a long time; recapitulation of the beginning of section 2.</td>
<td>“All the world goes by us and is reflected in our deeps. Such clarity! Obtained by such pure means. By simple living, by honest of purpose.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>90-103</td>
<td>14 (4+10)</td>
<td>Reminiscence of the beginning of the work, but now in <em>bocca chiusa</em>; choir finishes in unison, while the piano plays again the mirroring perfect fifths.</td>
<td>“To be calm, to be serene.”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CHAPTER TWO. THE PEACE OF WILD THINGS

“When despair for the world grows in me
And I wake in the night at the least sound
In fear of what my life and my children’s lives may be,
I go and lie down where the wood drake
Rests in his beauty on the water, and the great heron feeds,
I come into the peace of wild things
Who do not tax their lives with forethought
Of grief. I come into the presence of still water.
And I feel above me the day-blind stars
Waiting with their light. For a time
I rest in the grace of the world, and am free.”

Wendell Berry (born in 1934) is a farmer, environmental activist, essayist, poet, and novelist. Thoreau and Berry have a great deal in common. In fact, Wendell Berry’s biographer, Jason Peters, sees Berry as a reinvented Thoreau:

Neither Thoreau nor Berry suffers damage by the comparison. One went to the woods to live deliberately; the other went home to live defensibly. Both built small domiciles out of reused lumber, one on the ground beside a pond and the other on stilts alongside a river. As writers both are keen to etymological impertinence: “Of a life of luxury the fruit is luxury,” Thoreau says, “whether in agriculture, or commerce, or literature, or art”; “we are acting out the plot of a murderous paradox,” Berry says, “an ‘economy’ that leads to extravagance.” Both require mindfulness with respect to food: Thoreau says, “It is hard to provide and cook so simple and clean a diet as will not offend the imagination”; Berry says, “I dislike the thought that some animal has been made miserable in order to feed me.” Both attend to food in its many cultural, imaginative, and intellectual associations: so Thoreau, in pursuit of higher laws, says that “the gross feeder is a man in the larva state; and there are whole nations in that condition, nations without fancy or imagination, whose vast abdomens betray them”; and Berry, in pursuit of higher sense, says, “There is nothing more absurd… than the millions who wish to live in luxury and idleness and yet be slender and good-looking.”

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Another interesting connection between the two writers is *The Sabbath Poems*, a series of poems Berry started in 1979 and continues to add to every year. Professor and author Fritz Oehlschlaeger believes the genesis of this project could be based on Thoreau’s journals:

As Thoreau continues in ‘*Life Without Principle,*’ he notes the constant busyness of Americans, so engaged in ‘infinite bustle’ that ‘there is no Sabbath.’ And he notes later that ‘there is nothing, not even crime, more opposed to poetry, to philosophy, ay, to life itself, than this incessant business.’ The logic is clear: destruction of the Sabbath is contrary to ‘life itself.’ That, I suggest, is the context in which we should read the Sabbath poems that Berry has been writing for nearly the last thirty years.¹¹

*The Peace of Wild Things*, written in 2013, was the first piece of the *American Triptych* to be composed. Jake Runestad does not remember when he first encountered Wendell Berry’s work. Runestad keeps a collection of texts by Berry and many other authors, saved for future projects, and *The Peace of Wild Things* was in this collection for several years before he found an appropriate choir for it. When he received the commission to write a piece for the Young New Yorkers’ Chorus, he started thinking about the choir; not only its practical aspects (size, ability level), but also where it was based, and what was important for that community. When Runestad created the profile of this young choir in such an intense city as New York, he decided “to provide them some sense of peace, of solace, for their crazy kind of urban lives.” That was one of the reasons why he chose this text for that project.¹²

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When working on the composition, it is interesting to notice, in his manuscripts, that the first theme heard in the bass section was originally written for the soprano section. He decided to switch and give it to the basses, the lowest section in the choir, to embrace the deeper resonance of this solitude. While the basses sing the beginning of the poem, the other three parts vocalize. The introduction is in the tonal area of A minor, but with some cluster chords. To reinforce the expression, “in fear,” Runestad calls the tenor section to sing these words with basses, but in an interval of a second, with tenors being lower than basses. This cross-voicing creates an instability and contributes to the expression of anxiety.


The first text sung tutti is, “and the great heron feeds.” It is almost in unison, with a pedal tone sung by the lower basses, and a first inversion of a C9 chord on

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13 A cluster chord is a chord of diatonic construction with non-chord tones such as the 9th, 11th, and 13th.
the word “feeds.” That pedal tone could represent the still water. After that, the piano emulates a flying bird, to start the new section. The unison is used to highlight the contrast between human despair and fear with the grandiosity of the birds and the stillness of the water.


Jonathan Talberg says that one of the good qualities of Runestad as a composer is that he writes beautiful melodies in an age where melody has been lost; and, like great composers from the past, he sings his own music all the time. Talberg adds that having Runestad been a saxophone player before he started composing, he has, in some of his music, a little bit of jazz standards, American song book, and Broadway style.\(^\text{14}\) The next section starts exactly with that kind of melody, with a

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simple and syncopated rhythm. This melody does not have a wide range, but it moves graciously throughout the syncopated cell. Runestad is text-painting “the peace of wild things” with this new rhythmic-melodic element. The choir sings in a unison D “I come into the peace…,” then the music switches to E major. While the altos and basses sustain a pedal tone on the tonic, the sopranos and tenors move forward with, “…of wild things who do not tax their lives with forethought of grief.” This beautiful motive is repeated by the altos and baritones and again by the sopranos and tenors, now in parallel sixths. With a perfect fifth by the sopranos in measure 35, not on a downbeat but on the upbeat, Runestad wakes up all the wildlife around that lake.

Chorus part.

During this section, Runestad takes advantage of the choir's capacity to describe sounds of nature, and he writes a profuse polyphony to represent “the wild things.” Simultaneously, the piano has a very simple and delicate accompaniment, text-painting “the peace.” The basses, tenors and sopranos 1 and 2 also sing open fifths, but sustained, in contrast with the piano figure.

[Music notation image]

When Runestad finally arrives “to the presence of still water,” he switches the tonality to F sharp major. The piano keeps a low F sharp as a pedal tone, and plays a new and vibrant melody, while the altos and baritones sing in octaves, and the other parts tune the perfect fifth F sharp / C sharp.

**Example 2.5.** Measures 44-46, *The Peace of Wild Things*, Jake Runestad.

“The peace of wild things” is finally found. The vibrant melody played by the piano is no longer necessary, and it is substituted by a plagal cadence, while each singer, homophonically, in dissonant chords, rests “in the grace of world.” This is how Runestad sees a young singer in a metropolis like New York City finding peace and resting in the grace of this world.

This motive is repeated three times, diffusing the harmonic tension. The choir sings, “and am free,” sustaining the last word while the piano adds a new figure, a syncopated rhythm, which is sustained until the end of the piece.

While the altos, tenors and basses sustain their chord, the sopranos sing again the last three words and emerge above that chord. Alone, the sopranos sing for the last time the word, “free,” and the piano freely (indicated by a *molto rit* and a *dim. al niente*) finishes the piece.
Table 2. Herford Bar Analysis: *The Peace of Wild Things* – Jake Runestad

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SECTION</th>
<th>Measures</th>
<th>No. of Measures</th>
<th>Characteristics</th>
<th>Text</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>1-10</td>
<td>10 (6+4)</td>
<td>Presence of clusters; choir vocalizing; fluidity of tempo; tonal area of A minor</td>
<td>NONE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>11-29</td>
<td>19 (14+5)</td>
<td>Basses lead the melody; tonal area of A minor; second part casi recitativo and in the tonal area of G major, alternating IV and V7.</td>
<td>“When despair for the world grows in me and I wake in the night in fear [in fear] of my life and my children’s lives may be, I go and lie down where the wood drake rests in his beauty on the water and the great heron feeds.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>30-63</td>
<td>34 (15+5+14)</td>
<td>Structured in duets; first part in E major; second part in F sharp major; climax of the piece.</td>
<td>“I come into the peace of wild things who do not tax their lives with forethought of grief. I come into the presence of still water. And I feel above me the day-blind starts waiting with their light. [I come in the peace] For a time I rest in the grace of the world…”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coda</td>
<td>64-75</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>Piano has a new rhythmic motif; big cadence vi-IV-I; still in F sharp major.</td>
<td>“…And am free.”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CHAPTER THREE. COME TO THE WOODS

“Another glorious day, the air as delicious
To the lungs as nectar to the tongue.

The day was full of sparkling sunshine,
And at the same time enlivened with one of
The most bracing wind storms.

The mountain winds bless the forests with love.
They touch every tree, not one is forgotten.

When the storm began to sound,
I pushed out into the woods to enjoy it.
I should climb one of the trees for a wider look.

The sounds of the storm were glorious with
Wild exuberance of light and motion.
Bending and swirling backward and forward, round and round,
In this wild sea of pines.

The storm-tones died away, and turning toward the east,
I beheld the trees, hushed and tranquil.
The setting sun filled them with amber light, and seemed to say,
“Come to the woods, for here is rest,””\(^\text{15}\)

John Muir, known as the Father of National Parks, was a Scottish-American
author, philosopher, botanist, and naturalist. Born to a very religious family in
Scotland, his father decided to move to the United States because he thought the
Church of Scotland was not strict enough. During his adult life he spent a good
deal of time in Yosemite. In 1871, he served as a guide for Ralph Waldo Emerson
(Thoreau’s mentor), an author he read frequently. Emerson offered Muir a teaching
position at Harvard, but Muir declined, saying that he ‘would never give up God’s

big show for a mere job.’ After Emerson’s death, a friend found a list he had made of people he admired, and the last name on it was John Muir.¹⁶

Jake Runestad states that he found Muir’s journals on the Sierra Club website and fell in love with them. One of the many Muir writings that Runestad copied was the story of Muir climbing a tree during a storm. That became the genesis of *Come to the Woods*. He says that one of the very first things he wrote was the opening, “Another glorious day.” Initially he was concerned that the motive sounded “too hokey,” but then he realized that would be exactly how Muir would have said it with his Scottish accent. Runestad was trying to capture Muir’s voice, with a Scottish snap cell.

**Example 3.1.** Measures 1-3, *Come to the Woods*, Jake Runestad. Choir part.

The V-I G major cadence in the accompaniment establishes Muir climbing the tree.

**Example 3.2.** Measures 1-4, *Come to the Woods*, Jake Runestad. Piano part.

After repeating the opening statement, the choir sings with homophonic texture, “the air as delicious to the lungs as nectar to the tongue,” while the piano plays a delicate melody in its high register, and the opening motive is heard again, twice. Then, Runestad establishes a 12/8 metric scheme that will be very important in the text painting of the next section.
When working on the text, Runestad divided it into four sections. He calls the first section, “Opening,” the second, “Trees,” the third “Storms,” and the fourth “Final.” In this first section, the upper voices sing, “Glorious day,” alternating the sopranos and altos, while the lower voices sing the text, “The day was full of sparkling sunshine and at the same time enlivened with one of the most bracing wind-storms.” This section starts solidly in G major. The sopranos and altos alternate the “glorious day” motif, while the lower voices sing the text, “The day was full of sparkling sunshine,” accompanied by a pastoral motif played by the piano. After the repetition, with the lower voices singing, “And at the same time enlivened with one of the most bracing wind-storms,” the central tone moves to B flat major.
The piano interlude represents the wind-storm. It is noticeable how Runestad uses the pedal to create the wind effect. In the middle of the storm there is a very important motive, in measures 28 and 29, which possibly represents the tree, and it will appear several times later in the piece.

**Example 3.4.** Measures 24-35, *Come to the Woods*, Jake Runestad.

After that, in a “delicately flowing” new tempo, Runestad finishes the text of the opening section, with the upper voices singing in unison, “The mountain winds bless the forests with love.” The piano has a high melody representing the mountain, while playing ascending B major scales with the left hand, representing
the wind. He marks the importance of the word, “love,” adding the lower voices, and opening the harmony.

**Example 3.5.** Measures 36-40, *Come to the Woods*, Jake Runestad.
In the next phrase, “They touch every tree,” the same figure is repeated, but now a little higher. Perhaps Muir sees the trees as even higher than love? When the piano climbs up that high tree, reminiscent of the tree motive, the choir sings, “Not one is forgotten.” In the word, “forgotten,” there is a perfect F major chord, grounding by connecting all the high embellishment with roots. The piano plays F major scales with the right hand, while the left hand plays open chords. The pianist must have big hands, since Runestad does not call for arpeggios. The piano line ascends and again, the tree motive is heard, with the choir closing to “n” on “one,” in measures 51 to 54. At this point, Runestad text-paints Muir climbing the tree in an ascending scale played by the piano on measure 55.

The third section starts at measure 56, and it is a recapitulation of the first section. The ascending scale and the previous theme are heard again. Runestad inverts the motives between the lower and upper voices with the text, “When the storm began to sound, I pushed out into the woods to enjoy it.” At the end of this section, the choir is set almost totally in unison, while the piano part text-paints the words, “I should climb one of the trees for a wider look.” Knowing that Runestad wrote this piece with Muir’s voice in his mind, it is reasonable to conclude that this unison is a reference to the opening phrase of the song.

**Example 3.7. Measures 69-71, Come to the Woods, Jake Runestad.**

Runestad calls the third section “Storm.” It starts with John Muir climbing the tree to see the storm. Runestad represents this with ascending scales in the piano and in the voices. The tonality switches to A major.

When he arrives at the top of the tree, the piano plays a “lightning and thunder” motif.


Alternating between the lower and upper voices, the choir sings, “The sounds of the storm were glorious with wild exuberance of light and motion. Bending and swirling, backward and forward, round and round and round and
round.” To paint the text, Runestad brings back the 12/8 bar, and the piano plays arpeggiated open fifth chords. The storm section is in D major.

**Example 3.10.** Piano part, measures 79-80, *Come to the Woods*, Jake Runestad.

Muir contemplates the storm with all its exuberance. The lower voices join in unison singing, “The sounds of the storm were glorious,” while the upper voices support on an open fifth.

**Example 3.11.** Measures 79-82, *Come to the Woods*, Jake Runestad. Lower voices.

For the words, “bending and swirling, backward and forward, round and round and round and round,” Runestad writes a melodic cell, with the second pitch repeated. That creates the sense of movement the text requires, while the piano is still playing the storm motive. This is sung twice by the lower voices and repeated
by the upper voices. As in *The Peace of Wild Things*, this big section is structured
over a stretched cadence of I-vi-V-I.

**Example 3.12.** Measures 87-90, *Come to the Woods*, Jake Runestad. Lower voices and piano.

Muir’s ecstasy is fulfilled when the choir sings, still alternating between the upper and lower voices, “In this wild sea of pines.” In the climax of this section, the choir sings the highest pitch in the piece, a B natural.
The piano ostinato represents the storm sustaining, while the choir repeats these words in a *messa di voce* over several measures. It is not only getting softer, but also lower and slower, with an extended *ritardando*, where the pulse decreases from 88 mm to 40 mm in eight measures. Another element the composer uses to paint the cycle of the storm is the tessitura; the pitches go high when the dynamic increases and low when it decreases.

After the catharsis, we hear again the “tree theme,” followed by an ascending scale in a short six bar piano solo. It is a moment of transformation, marking the end of the storm. With glimpses of the lightning motive in the piano, the choir sings, “The storm tones died away and turning toward the east, I beheld the trees hushed and tranquil. The setting sun filled them with amber light and seemed to say…,” and here starts the fourth section, which Runestad calls “Final.”
The closing tonality is A major. The piano plays a simple theme in a high register over four bars. The lower voices echo the hymnic style with the words, “Come to the woods, for here is rest.” It is an invitation from Muir to the whole of humanity. The score asks for tenor 1 and 2 to switch their melodies each time the hymn is sung. The piano plays what sounds like improvisation, and the hymn is heard again from the lower voices. This hymn theme will work as an ostinato until almost the end of the piece, as a mantra. The phrase has a structure of five measures, as the last chord is extended to give space for other elements, such as piano and upper voices, to revisit old motifs.


For a last time, alternating sopranos 1 and 2 sing “Another glorious day.” It is reminiscent of the gaiety heard at the opening measures, but a little more somber and respectful.

Soprano part.

![Soprano part notation]

The upper voices begin vocalizing in aleatoric fashion, while the piano plays some of the previous themes. It is as if all of nature joins Muir at this point.

Although Runestad writes the pitches for upper voices (six cells), he gives the singers some liberty and fluidity. He writes at the bottom of that page:

> Each treble singer chooses one of the boxed motives to sing at random occurrences but still within the meter. Repeat the motives ad lib and keep the sound constant. The singer should hold the pre-box pitch until beginning the series. Each voice’s entrances should be sprinkled in and not all begin at once. Individual pitches may be held throughout the series before continuing the sequence.\(^{17}\)

> Inadvertently, the whole choir is sustaining a chord, while the piano keeps “improvising” over the previous motives. At the end, when the chorus closes the chord in a *bocca* chiusa, the listener hears in the piano echoes of John Muir’s adventure, ready for “another glorious day!”

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### Table 3. Herford Bar Analysis: *Come to the Woods* – Jake Runestad

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SECTION</th>
<th>Measures</th>
<th>No. of Measures</th>
<th>Characteristics</th>
<th>Text</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Introduction</strong></td>
<td>1-14</td>
<td>14 (5+3+6)</td>
<td>Invocation; John Muir's <em>leitmotif</em>.</td>
<td>&quot;Another glorious day, the air as delicious to the lungs as nectar to the tongue. Another glorious day.&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>15-23</td>
<td>9 (4+3+2)</td>
<td>G major; 12/8; transition to B flat major.</td>
<td>&quot;The day was full of sparkling sunshine and at the same time enlivened with one of the most bracing wind storms.&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interlude</td>
<td>24-35</td>
<td>12 (4+8)</td>
<td>Wind and tree motifs.</td>
<td>NONE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>36-55</td>
<td>20 (6+4+5+5)</td>
<td>B major; E flat major; F major; tree motif.</td>
<td>&quot;The mountain winds bless the forests with love, they touch every tree, not one is forgotten.&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A'</td>
<td>56-71</td>
<td>16 (9+4+3)</td>
<td>F major; E major; D major; section in unison a cappella.</td>
<td>&quot;When the storm began to sound, I pushed out into the woods to enjoy it. I should climb one of the trees for a wider look.&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bridge</td>
<td>72-76</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Ascending scales in A major.</td>
<td>NONE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>77-118</td>
<td>42 (1+10+8+23)</td>
<td>Lightning and thunder; storm section; D major; climax of the piece.</td>
<td>&quot;The sounds of the storm were glorious with wild exuberance of light and motion. Bending and swirling, backward and forward, round and round and round. In this wild sea of pines.&quot;</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(table cont’d.)
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SECTION</th>
<th>Measures</th>
<th>No. of Measures</th>
<th>Characteristics</th>
<th>Text</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Interlude'</td>
<td>119-124</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>Return of the tree motif; modulation to G major.</td>
<td>NONE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B'</td>
<td>125-136</td>
<td>12 (5+4+2+1)</td>
<td>Simplified version of B; it finishes with the wind motif.</td>
<td>&quot;The storm tones died away and turning toward the east, I beheld the trees, hushed and tranquil, the setting sun filled them with amber light and seemed to say...&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coda</td>
<td>137-176</td>
<td>40 (4+9+4+7+10+6)</td>
<td>Hymn style; A major; kind of improvisation for piano and upper voices.</td>
<td>&quot;...Come to the woods, for here is rest.&quot;</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CHAPTER FOUR. PERFORMANCE GUIDE FOR THE CONDUCTOR

This chapter is intended as a practical guide for the *American Triptych*. The author provides guidelines for the conductor, but the intention is not to create a set of formulas for an “ideal” performance. The process of performance is subjective, and conductors have their own approach to a particular work. This performance guide is based on a meticulous study of the music score, as well as an interview with the composer by the author.

Jake Runestad writes music based on the text. Before starting the compositional process, he speaks the words several times, until he feels their natural musicality. Then he begins by merging the natural speech inflection of the words into a natural musicality. That is why his music has so many time signature changes, and a considerable number of alternating duple and triple metric configurations. According to the composer, “English … is not a language of just duple rhythms. … They are triple and duple.”18 He is very meticulous in his writing, and nothing in his score is there by chance.

The rhythm is defined by the text. The melodies are defined by the text. The accompaniment is defined by the text. Therefore, the text should be the starting point for approaching this cycle. When singing, even in the first rehearsal, the conductor needs to make sure each singer gives the right inflection to each word in the text. This will make the alternation between duples and triples more natural, especially for native English speakers.

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18 Jake Runestad, interview by author, December 2020.
When preparing this piece, the author suggests that the singers first speak the text to feel the anatomy of each word. It would be very useful for both the singers and conductor to mark word stresses and shifting time signatures in the score.

In an interview with the composer via email dated January 18, 2021, Jake Runestad discussed performance practice issues related to the conductor and the singers. As mentioned above, his first consideration was attention to the text, prosody, and shape of the line.

The attention to triplets is a significant issue in Runestad’s music. He states in an e-mail,

Detailed attention to triplets as a stretched element VERY different from a duple rhythmic value. This is taken from my jazz background, and triplets should always be felt on the back end of the beat, relaxed, stretched. This is where they really shine as a rhythmic element that creates tension and counters the feeling of the duple rhythm. Another important element of this is to clearly distinguish from duple rhythms for the clarity of text. English is not a strictly duple language, and we speak in a mixture of duple and triple rhythms. Therefore, when desiring clarity of text, I utilize this duple/triple difference in rhythmic values in order to bring attention to and clarify the prosody of the text.

Runestad’s use of *ritardandi* for temporal shifts are key to the natural pacing of the work. He states in the same e-mail,

*Ritardandi* are not merely optional, they must be adhered to and executed with intention. This requires specific rehearsal time utilizing subdivisions of the beat as the tempo shifts so that each performer FEELS the slowing down in relation to the larger beat.

The composer’s expectation is that the singers deeply engage the musical line or section with the character of any moment. This is a human interaction in its most natural state – to experience the emotion evidenced through the musical imagery.
The piano accompaniment is rather technically challenging and demands a sensitive and skilled pianist. Therefore, for performing this cycle, it is very important to have a great pianist who is available for the whole process. Even during the interludes, the author recommends that the conductor conducts the pianist, to keep the unity and integrity of the performance.

This cycle is appropriate repertoire for an advanced high school choir, as well as for college and professional choirs. The main divisi is SSAATTBB, and it is very demanding for all parts. The ideal number of singers depends on the ability and age of the singers. For a professional chamber choir, the minimum suggested per divisi part is 3 for a total of 24 singers. For a high school or collegiate chorus, an ensemble of 50 or 60 singers would still be effective. Flexibility in voicing is one of the strengths of Runestad’s music. These works can be sung with an intimate chamber choir or a larger chorus. If a larger chorus is used, care should be taken not to compromise the clarity of the text or the balance of the piano accompaniment.

This piece is highly challenging for the conductor, the choir, the pianist and the audience. For the conductor, it requires a diligent study of the score, with a lot of changings in the metrics and several ritardandi and accelerandi, to respect the natural inflexion of the text. For the choir, it requires great aural skills, excellent vocal technique, demanding tessituras. For the pianist, it requires a high-level technique and ability to listen to the choir and follow the conductor. For the audience, it requires the ability to embrace complex harmonies and substantive poetry and text. Due to its 24-minute duration, it would not fill an entire program. As the writers of the texts are all environmentalists, a good suggestion for a program
would be works which have some connection with the planet, nature, or some ecological theme. The author suggests, for the sake of variety, pieces in different languages and, if possible, under-represented and non-traditional composers. The author also suggests performing the *American Triptych* as closure to the concert.
CONCLUSION

When asked about how he sees his music in the canon of Western choral masterpieces, Runestad said, “I hope that my music in some way might cause others to think deeply about an issue, to learn of someone else’s story; to foster compassion; to cause them to take interest in a different community, in a different culture, in a different person; to see how we are all human and we all have these shared stories that are pretty much the same all around the world.”

In the email interview, Runestad states that the American Triptych, as a cycle, has a strong and dramatic form, and it brings the performers and the audience in a trip across the United States, from Thoreau (Massachusetts) to Berry (Kentucky) to Muir (California). But it does not limit itself to this country. It is a work which deserves to be performed and appreciated not only here, but all around the world, because its texts bring the audience to a deeper connection with nature, and consequently, with themselves.

The American Triptych is a brilliant assimilation of poets’ impassioned words for the care of all creation, both nature and humankind. These words are set in a musical language that moves body and soul.

Extensive research and conversation with Jake Runestad have convinced this author that Jake is a compassionate human being, committed to write good music in consonance with the planet’s and the humanity’s needs. As the transcendentalists believe, human beings and nature are, in their essence, good. It appears that Runestad has attempted to capture some of this essence within the

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Triptych. It is the hope of the author that this document will encourage the performance of this cycle and inspire further research and investigation into the music of Jake Runestad.

“We live but a fraction of our life.”\textsuperscript{20}

\textsuperscript{20} Opening line of Reflections, the opening number of the American Triptych.
Néviton Barros – Hey, Jake, how are you? Good afternoon.

Jake Runestad *(smiling)* – Hi.

NB – I’m so glad that you made some time in your busy holiday agenda for having this interview with me. I am a DMA candidate at LSU and my mentor is Dr. John Dickson, and I’m doing my lecture recital on the American Triptych; and you probably do not remember, but we’ve met on the last national conference of ACDA, before the conference started, and I took a picture with you. When they said “that is Jake Runestad”, and me: “Oh, I have to take a selfie with him!”

JR *(laughing)*

NB – I have it in my cell phone. It will probably appear in my presentation.

JR – Oh, awesome!

NB – So, I have some questions for you and feel free to add anything you think I need to know.

JR – Sure.

NB – Reading in your website and also other interviews you had about your path through a composition, I see that, for you, the text is the soul of your music. You start with the text and, according to what I’ve read, you start singing the text around until you have the melody and then you build everything starting on that. As we already have Dr. Hathaway’s dissertation about you, which cover a lot of your biography, I’m not focusing my work on your biography because also your website has a lot of that. So I’d like to ask you: when and how was your first contact with Wendell Berry?
JR – Hmm… I don’t remember. *(laughing)* I have no idea. I know that that poem, *The Piece of Wild Things* has been… It was on my radar for several years before I set it to music. You know, I have a collection of poems and whenever I find one that I like I throw it in that collection so that when I have a project, you know, I can go through all these poems that I’ve saved and then find the right one for the next project. And I don’t remember when I came across that poem, specifically, but I knew right when I read it that someday I would want to set it to music and then it was a matter of finding, I having the right project come along for it to apply. So, yeah, I’m not sure but… You know, I was writing this piece for the Young New Yorkers’ Chorus and I was just imagining like I do, for all my commissions, you know, I’m thinking deeply about. Who is this that I’m writing for, what are the strengths of this group. You know, what’s the size, what’s the ability level, all of these different aspects; where are they based, what’s important to that community, and having them based in New York City, I thought… You know, the city has such an intense energy to it. And even when you go to Central Park, you’re still in the city. And so I wanted to provide them some sense of peace, of solace, for their crazy kind of urban lives. And so that was one of the reasons that I chose that text for them as well.

NB – Yeah. Have you read other material from Barry?

JR – Yeah, quite a bit.

NB – So yes, I see it was commissioned by a Choir in New York City. And how was the genesis of *The Piece of Wild Things*? How did it start?

JR – The piece itself, like when I was writing?

NB – Yes.
**JR** – Oh gosh, I have no idea. It was so long ago.

**NB** – Yeah.

**JR** – Yeah, I don’t know. Let me go… Wait, I might have my manuscript on here. Let me check. Ha, I do. So I save… I’m looking at the manuscript. And it looks like… It looks like the first thing that I did was the opening. *(Singing the melody)* And then I have a little… If I can throw this in the chat. Let me see if I can do this. *(Laughing)* Okay. How do I…? Oh wait, maybe I can just drag it in. All right, here we go. Let’s see. Let’s see if it lets me do this.

**NB** – Isn’t it amazing all the things we can do with technology in our days?

**JR** – Yeah, it doesn’t wanna work though. Let’s see, copy… hmm… No. Okay. If I… Okay, I can do this. I can export or save to Piece of Wild Things, first page. Okay. All right, let’s see. File. *(Laughing)* Does stop. There it is. Alright, it’s loading into the chat.

**NB** – That’s amazing. I’ve got a file. It says “Jake Runestad shared a file in the meeting.”

**JR** – That’s it.

**NB** – Okay, I appreciate that. I probably will have that file… If you don’t mind, I would have that file in my final document, because that’s…

**JR** – That’s fine. You can see right at the beginning there I’ve got *(singing)* “I’ve come into the peace of the wild things…” *(laughing)* which is like, I was running through that idea early on, I guess. Which didn’t stick. And you’ll see that I actually have the main melody in the sopranos.

**NB** – It’s still opening here…

**JR** – Ok.
NB – Oh, now I can see! Now finally! Well, yeah. So you started it with sopranos.

JR – Right. The rhythms are all there because that’s all based on the text.

NB – Okay.

JR – But yeah, it looks like that’s what I came up with first. And then I rewrote it at the bottom there.

NB – So I see that you first write the voice parts and then the piano part.

JR – It looks like that’s what happened here.

NB – But that’s not what happens all the time…

JR – That’s not necessarily always the case. Sometimes I’m just getting down the ideas. And I… It’s in my head. Like, I can hear the piano part, but I don’t write it down yet because it takes way more time to write down… (laughing) So then I go back later and put that in.

NB – I’m not a composer, but I’m an arranger and when I was in Brazil I had an ensemble. I used to arrange music for them. And I never ever wrote down the accompaniment parts because, usually, I didn’t have an accompanist. I was the accompanist myself so I just sat and played. And today when people ask me for the scores… “Where is the piano part?” I say “Well, it’s in my head.”

JR (laughing) – Right. Yeah. That’s how it works. Yeah.

NB – But you have to put it on paper because you are not arranging somebody else’s music.

JR – Yeah, I do, yeah. And it’s very time consuming, especially for a piece like this. Well, all three of these pieces were very demanding.

NB – Yeah, they are.

JR (laughing) – For those piano parts.
NB – When and how was your first contact with John Muir and how was the process of adapting his writings to fit in Come to the Woods?

JR – I also don’t remember when I first heard of him. Probably when I was out west, you know, with Muir woods being out there and Yosemite, you know, he founded Yosemite National Park and there’s a lot named after him out in California. And I came across his writings once and I just fell in love with them. And so for that piece I went on the Sierra Club website where they have an archive where you can read all of his journals and other writings for free. And so I collected a bunch of those and copied them into my, you know, into my notes and just went through all these different texts until I found things that I thought would fit well. Let’s see, I’ve got… I could share a part of this libretto. Let’s see. How do I do this? Technology… Well, I can figure it out later. But I could send you part of the text and the way that I scratched things out and took certain…

NB – Yeah, that would be interesting as well.

JR – Yeah. So it took me quite a while to figure out what exactly I wanted to say. And then they came across that story of him climbing a tree in a storm. And I thought, that’s it. That’s the central image. So I decided I would leave, I would use that. But then I had to find other elements of the journey. And so, you know, is him starting setting off, walking or sauntering down the trail, you know, admiring the things around him so…

NB – That’s… The piece sounds and looks like a mini opera for choir when you can see this character through this journey in the nature. It’s very good, especially for me as a non-American choir person, reading these three pieces. The poets,
and this understanding, because they are very deep Americans. So for me, it’s absolutely new material and I’m just very in love with them.

**JR** – What’s unique about them, besides the language? Like, what makes these texts unique to you, you know, from your background? Like, what makes them uniquely American?

**NB** – Well, I would say. I’m Brazilian but I also lived in different countries. I’ve lived in Peru, as you [did]. I’ve lived in Chile. And in every country there are writers, and they have a way to connect to the land, to the country. And in these three texts, it’s probably the language, because it’s English. Some figures they use, which I’m, I was not used to. Indeed, when I was reading [the texts] for the first time I had to check with the translator [app] several of the words because they were absolutely new for me. And though… Usually when I’m preparing a piece which is in a foreign language (and for me, English is a foreign language), I not only read the text, but I also read it out loud so I can feel the words in my mouth. And some of them I indeed had no idea how to pronounce them. I had to check on the translator [app] because in English you don’t have, like, strict rules [of pronunciation] like in German or in Spanish. You really have to understand, to know the words. So it’s really a process of learning for me. Every time I approach one of those pieces it does the same thing. For example, we did last year with LSU A Cappella singers. We did A Silence Haunts Me. And the way the poem is written, with the spaces between the “I,” and “We” … I was trying to read that, like, giving the time, space… So I was giving like five seconds separating any “I”, so I had the dimension of the idea of the poet and yet, it’s… Digging into the text of your music really gives… I believe it gives us a feeling from the inside, instead of… Usually when you got to
one of, for example, Brahms. I just did it in my recital the Neue Liebeslieder. So you take the text, but it’s… You come from the music to text and, in your music, at least… Please, correct me if I’m wrong, I feel it comes from the text to the notes to the harmonies to the whole thing, and that’s why it was different for me.

**JR** – I love that description. That’s beautiful.

**NB** – Oh… When I came to this program at LSU, one of the reasons I was afraid of not being accepted, it’s because I’m already in my 40s. And I said to Dr. Dickson, “I know I’m too old but I promise you that I’m open to learn new things” and that’s my… I’ve learned through the true life that every experience in life it’s experience of learning, it’s a learning process. It doesn’t matter how bad the situation looks. But everything’s a learning process. And you can learn from everything, from children, from elderly, from disabled people. That’s why I always… When I’m with a person I’m committed 100% to that person. If we can have like an earthquake happening as it happened when I was in Chile, it was having an earthquake, and I don’t let that take off my… Oh, when I was now in November. I was recording my second doctoral recital. It was in an open garage parking because of COVID-19 and we had a marching band rehearsing outside, we had a helicopter, and we had a fire… I thought: We are here to do the best music we can. So let’s just ignore whatever is happening. So I believe this focus on the present is what gives me this beautiful experience in everything I do.

**JR** – Yeah, and I think as you’re talking about that. I think that’s what all of these writers, I sense in their writing that that makes them unique, right? Thoreau was literally removed from the world when he was writing. Wendell Berry very intentional, very much present, very much concerned about community, taking care
of those people around him. And then, John Muir also just so engaged. Like I, in this piece, I just imagine him completely immersed in the world around him, like so presence, so aware of the tiniest fluctuation in scent, or in light, or in wind as he’s walking around. It sounds like that’s a good fit for you and what you are looking on.

**NB** – And you paint all those feelings. In the piano part we can hear…

**JR** *(laughing)* – Well, I try…

**NB** – That’s very well done. And what can you tell me about the genesis of, “Come to the Woods”? How did that project start?

**JR** – Hmm… Well, it was commissioned by Conspirare, Craig Hella Johnson, and… Craig and I had a conversation about this project where he was doing a concert on human connections. And so I was interested in doing something about the human connection to the earth. And so, I think, pretty quickly I went to John Muir and decided to use his writings. And then, as I said, I just went through a bunch of them and collected them and then started honing to find the right libretto or the right composite text for this. You know, taking bits from here in there, and putting them together to find just the right way to tell the story. And then, you know, it’s… I remember one of the first things I wrote was *(singing)* Another glorious day! And at first I thought, I was concerned that it sounded too hokey.

**NB** *(laughing)*

**JR** – But then I realized: no, this is exactly how John Muir would have said it. You know, he was born in Scotland. So he still had this bit of a Scottish accent. And so a prominent figure that happens throughout the piece is this rhythmic element called the Scotch snap, the Scottish champ, which is the *(singing)* yadaaaa, tadaaaa, another… *(singing with Scottish accent)* Another glorious day! Like I
imagined him singing it like that. And so I had to make sure I also was capturing his own voice. And so I just, I stuck with it because it was right, you know.

NB – Yeah.

JR – It was John Muir’s energy.

NB – So you are saying you did that, like, you tried to imagine the writers singing the words when you are composing?

JR – Not necessarily singing the words. But I don’t know. In this case, that felt natural to me because I feel like he would be the guy that would be singing as he’s walking down the trail like just in love with everything around him. (laughing)

NB – Yeah, that has been beautiful.

JR – Yeah.

NB – And, okay… And about Henry David Thoreau, it says that you select from his journals. And so how did you get, how did you have access to his journals and how did you, how was the process of adapting those words to make a music of them?

JR – It was very similar to Into The Woods. A very similar process. In that, I just read through a bunch of different writings, collective things that I liked and then kept honing and honing and honing until I found, you know, just the right, the right version of things. Let’s see. I don’t think I have… I can go grab my manuscript for that one later and take a look. Yeah, and I started to find these too, the duality of living fully and seizing life, but also not to the detriment of losing a sense of the depth of yourself. And so those are the two aspects that I wanted to play with. And then the entire piece, you know, musically is built on reflected material. You know, with the center line on the staff and then melodies are reflected across that line throughout the piece.
NB — That’s beautiful, beautiful. Yeah. And that’s my next question. How did you start writing Reflections? So you just had, it was like a mirror that the melodies are mirroring…

JR — Yeah, I know that would be a concept. The first thing that I came up with was that opening piano bar. *(singing the piano melody)* And I remember that I was at a friend’s place and I was just sitting at his piano and I came up with that figure, and I knew I was going to use it someday *(laughing)* in a piece. And then I decided to use it for this one. And to me it evokes that kind of, that energy of rushing water.

NB — And the three pieces, they were commissioned by three different choruses. We already know that the three writers are like environmentalists. So what would you say would be the similarities and the main differences between the three pieces?

JR — Gosh, it’s probably better for you to tell me that. *(laughing)* I think that they’re similar in that, like you said, they’re written by individuals who are definitely concerned about our relationship with the Earth. Especially the way that we’ve been so destructive to it and how that needs to change. They… the way that they love the Earth, their respect for it. I think that I endeavored to tell stories. And all of these pieces to take us on a journey throughout each piece. That follows, you know, the text of what these people wrote. I think that they each have a different musical life to them. They each have a different sonic landscape and emotional landscape due to the subject matter and also due to the personality of the poet. And I try to do that with every piece, you know, I don’t want every piece to sound the same. And I want to be able to find my way into the voice of the poet, so that I can illuminate it with the music.
NB – Okay, that was really a very beautiful answer, especially when you said about our connection with Earth and how… I saw a meme yesterday. Some sign saying “Do not put your trash away because the Earth is our home. So there is not really away.” And, do you think, with everything happening in the world right now, [that] we, as human beings, are changing in our relationship with the planet? Can you see that from your perspective?

JR – Not as much as it needs to happen. You know, there are so many major issues in our world right now. Clearly the pandemic is one of them. And in the US…

NB – Indeed, I believe that the pandemic is one consequence…

JR – Well, yeah, I’m just thinking about more immediate, you know, things, but you know. The racial issues in this country and the political division and… but really, the greatest issue of our time is the climate crisis. And we are not doing enough. We have, we continue to destroy the Earth for the sake of progress. But what is that progress for?

NB – Yeah.

JR – So that we can build more, so that we can destroy more, so we can have more power as a species; you know, we’ve completely lost touch and are so selfish about how we live on this planet, and so… It should, it has to change. And we’re not doing enough, and we need to change. We all need to look at ourselves and say, “how can I change the way I live, how can I get out of my own selfishness and be more concerned about the well-being of the Earth as a whole.”
NB – That’s beautiful. My next question is: when and why did you decide to set them together as an American Triptych? And: Would you define this setting as environmentalist? Which style would you define this setting?

JR – Gosh, I don’t remember when I put them together, but I, when I finished Reflections, I thought, you know, these three pieces they are all for piano and choir, they all deal with different environmentalists, American environmentalists, and I think they could work as a set pretty well. So I decided to do that. I think that they are. They’re very much exploring human emotions, more specifically. But broadly, if we are doing our work and listening to these people, and what they were concerned about in their time or what they worked for. It’s definitely environmental related. You know, environmental preservation. So, while they’re not necessarily specifically about that, I think it’s all wrapped up in what these writers are saying, trying to express.

NB – That makes sense. The next question has nothing to do with the American Triptych. It’s more about you. How did 2020 change the composer Jake Runestad and the human being Jake Runestad?

JR – What was the beginning of the question? How…?

NB – How did 2020 change the composer and the human being Jake Runestad.

JR – Oh, what a year! (laughing)

NB – Exactly. I had to ask that.

JR – As a composer, my productivity completely tanked.

NB – Sorry, what did you say? Completely what?

JR – Tanked. Meaning it just dropped. Yeah. It… I have found it really difficult to write music. Hmm… It’s taken me a really, really long time to write… One piece
that I’ve been working on. I think it feel like I’ve been working on it since January, like all year, which is ridiculous. It shouldn’t take me that long. But it’s just been really hard because I’m used to traveling so much and none of that is happening. I’m used to making music with people and being inspired by them and none of that is happening. So it’s hard to get things done when there’s all the time in the world to get it done. So 2020 is definitely been a struggle in that respect. Personally, it’s been a struggle for the same reasons. Really missing the travel, missing interacting with other people. You know, my job as a composer is, there’s a certain aspect of alone time that is required, which is necessary. But the problem now is I don’t have the balance of being able to go out and be with other people and make music and engage and teach and conduct it. Now, it’s just all the alone, all the recharge, introspective time, so it’s been a struggle to find that lack of balance. And that, of course, with everything going on in the world, with seeing these deaths from the pandemic, of having my community hit incredibly hard. After the murder of George Floyd happening right here in Minneapolis and the rioting that happened that was mere blocks from where I live. You know, my neighborhood is still boarded up, there is still plywood over windows and stores all over the place, my bank was destroyed, completely burned to the ground, my post office was completely destroyed, so… And also, just looking at, even more deeply at… the ways that I might be perpetuating this issue of white dominance in the world, in this country. And just having to reflect even more about what part I play in any of that, or how can I help give others a voice or offered others voice or get out of the way, or lift up other voices. So it’s been a very introspective, very tumultuous year. Not as productive as I would hope. But I think that’s okay, because it was a lot to process.
**NB** – Yes. I know you were born and raised a Lutheran, but you do not profess any faith right now, according to what I saw in your biography, and in that we are different because I do profess a faith, which is also not the faith I was born and raised: I found my own way to connect to The Divine. But what I’ve learned is that there’s nothing we can do about who we are in our essence. You are what you are: you are a white male American person and there is nothing you can do about that. And you shouldn’t. But it’s very important when you use your position of privilege and you acknowledge that there are people who are struggling just because they are not as you are. And when somebody in your position acknowledges that, and not only acknowledges that, but say it every time you have a chance, you make the world think more and more about it; and I wish we had more people like you, who are in the position of privilege and acknowledge that to say [it] out loud. What can we do to make life easier to those who are not in the same position as me? So, as somebody who is an immigrant, and in a completely different position than you, I have to thank you for being not only conscious about that, but for speaking about that every time you have an opportunity to, because I’ve read [it] in some of your interviews, and you’ve also said about female composers and I believe, yes, we have to start giving voices to people who never had a chance to have their voices [heard]. Maybe 2020 was the year when we’ve learned that we do have to listen to others. The world is bigger than just my happy bubble with my beautiful friends making beautiful music and… Yes, the world is bigger than that. It’s harder for a lot of people and we have to be grateful for being where we are. But we cannot close our eyes to those who are not with us.

**JR** – Absolutely. Absolutely, yeah. Yeah, for sure. For sure.
NB – The next question is: Today, December 16th, allegedly, we are celebrating Beethoven’s 250th birthday. There are some connections between your music and Beethoven’s, in Dr. Christopher Hathaway dissertation. Also, there is A Silence Haunts Me, which I had the honor to perform it with LSU A Cappella Singers, under Dr. John Dickson’s baton. In 2236, when the world would be celebrating your birthday 250, how would you like to be remembered?

JR (laughing) – That’s insanely crazy!

NB – In other words, how do you see your music impacting future generations of performers and audiences?

JR – Aw, wow…

NB – I thought a lot to write this question.

JR – I hope it’s still being performed. That would be amazing if it was still being performed 250 years from now. Hmm… You know, I think that we all ask these questions of why am I here. What is this all about. I know 2020 I’ve been asking that a lot. Like, what is the point. Why, you know, why am I on this earth? Why am I living. Why is my life so short, and does it even mean anything in this tiny little blip on the timeline of humanity? And I still don’t know what the answer is. But what I do know that for myself, I want to find a meaningful way of living, while I’m here.

And for me, that’s creating art, because I find it art to be one of the most profound, emotive, the most profound ways of expressing what it is to be alive. And so I try to do so in a way that connects us to each other that bridges divides, that bridges… hmm… walls… that bridges… lines that are drawn to separate a country or a continent or a state or a community or culture or whatever it might be.

NB – And right now even families.
JR – Yeah. And so, I hope that my music in some way might cause others to think deeply about an issue, to learn of someone else’s story. To foster compassion. To cause them to take interest in a different community, in a different culture, in a different country, in a different person; to see how we are all humans and we all have these shared stories that are pretty much the same all around the world. And yet we often forget, even though we’re so connected. We’re more connected now than we’ve ever been in the history of humankind. And yet we still forget that the way I interact with my family is just the same as families on the other side of the world. You know, we want the same things, we want to be happy. We want to eat. We want to enjoy each other’s company. We want to prosper. We want to express ourselves. So it would be amazing if people are still performing my music in 2200, in whatever that year was, 2200… (laughing)

NB – I can say it – 2236.

JR – Yeah… And if they are performing my music, I hope that it’s still finding, helping them to find ways into their meaningful ways into their own human existence, that connects them with the people around them and across the world.

NB – So, I don’t have more questions for you at this moment, but is there anything else you’d like to address before we finish this interview?

JR – So, I’m just curious, like, what, what’s your point of view for the paper. What about the piece are you exploring?

NB – Well, I’ve… The first contact I have with your music was at LSU in my first year and I do not remember the name of the piece, I have to be honest with you. But we’ve sang one of your music, and it was so beautiful! I was like, I really loved his music. And when I went to the national conference at ACDA, one of my
colleagues, who was my roommate, he pointed at you and said, “That’s Jake Runestad.” And then, “Oh, I have to take a selfie with him.” So, I went to take a selfie, and I started to listen more to your music. And when I saw the premiere of A Silence Haunts Me, I couldn’t stop crying. That music really touched my soul. I couldn’t stop crying and… When I came to LSU, my first idea of writing my final document would have been about a Brazilian composer, but my mentor, Dr. Dickson, he advised me on writing about an American composer. “Cause if you are here in the United States, you have to know more about the music we are doing in this country.” So I started looking for new composers, and every time I was going back to your music because your music was just touching my soul. And so, I created a playlist with your music on Spotify to listen to it… No, it was on YouTube. They were videos. I started listen to it, and then I had Dreams of the Fallen, which again I did connect that with Beethoven. I said, “This is like Beethoven’s Choral Fantasy: it’s piano, it’s meaningful words, and choir, so maybe I should write my document comparing these two pieces. Maybe Runestad is the Beethoven of the 21st century.” And then, when I contacted you first, and thank you for being so generous and giving me [access to] the material I was asking for, even not knowing me. And when I started working in that piece, my mentor again came and said, “Néviton, this is such a huge project. There’s so much written about Beethoven, you have to dig so… you cannot write that in the short time of a DMA program.” And I was like: yes, that’s right. And I started… My minor is vocal pedagogy and at LSU we have the blessing of having Dr. Loraine Sims as the head of vocal ped[agogy], and I don’t know if you’re aware of her, but she does an amazing job on teaching transgender singers. And I believe that community, which is so
important in the arts environment, has been neglected for so long. So I tried to find transgender composer[s] to write about her music and I found one. But she didn’t have enough material for me to build the project. So I said, “Okay, I have to come back to Runestad.” I had to come back to Runestad. And I started looking on your portfolio and talking with Dr. Dickson, he suggested to me, “What about these three pieces?” And then, I started listen to them with more attention and my approach to it will be: I will, I want to learn more about the poets, about the writers, the three writers. So I want to read more, more material about them. And then I want to, through this interview, I want to understand what is your process [of] composing the music and I will use the Julius Hereford method of analysis, of bar analysis, to analyze your pieces, and I want to write a performance guide for composers, for conductors who want to do that music and I will use the LSU Chamber Singers as a choir in my presentation. In my… I forgot the word in English. Sorry. In my lecture recital. My lecture recital. And that’s the dream. That’s the plan.

JR – Cool. Okay. Nice. Hmm… And so, as you’re working, do you hope to have more conversations with me or you kind of just doing your, your thing now?

NB – I, well, this is like the basis. I will… Zoom will send me an email with this material, which it’s good because they send me not only the video, but also the subtitles of all the conversation. And if you… I know how busy you are, so if you have more time, I would love to have another conversation with you when I’m close to do the thing, and that would be around March, I would say March, April, that’s going to be, but I don’t wanna abuse your good will, because I know you are very busy and I hope you will be busier next year.
JR (laughing) – I would be happy to help you out! I just… If you’re looking to do like a performance guide for it, we definitely have a lot to talk about. As far as like interpretation of things.

NB – Yes. Sorry. One thing I’ve noticed in your music, not only the Triptych but in the other pieces I’ve sang, it’s that, like Britten, you are a very clear composer, you write everything in your music. But yes, I, my goal would be a performance guide. So yes, I’d love if you have time for another conversation!

JR – Oh yeah. Yeah, I mean, just for example, one of the things that I just continue to run into every single time is… people never performing triplets correctly.

(laughing)

NB – Oh…

JR – So, like, that is an important thing for you to write about, I think, because, you know, my music is following English, which is not a language of just duple rhythms.

NB – Absolutely.

JR – They are triple and duple. And so, that’s why, you know, shifts so much in my music. But people rush triplets, all the time. And so that would be an important aspect of a performance guide. (laughing)

NB – As you said before, it’s about the text. So you just write how the words should sound. So, for a native speaker of English that should not be an issue.

JR – Yeah, I know. Well… (laughing)

NB (laughing)

JR – Yeah, cool. Yeah, well, feel free to email me with some, you know, any questions or whatever.
NB – Yes, I’ll be waiting. You said, you’re sending me the other, hmm, first page, the words…

JR – Yeah, I will see if I can find that.

NB – That would be very important to have in my document. Thank you so much for your time and I hope one day we will have a chance to have a conversation face to face, because those are my favorites, and have a great Holiday season, and, I hope, even with all the restrictions we are having, you have time to enjoy your family. And send my best regards to your parents and your sister, and everybody.

JR – And you as well. Thanks! Take care!

NB – Thank you so much! Have a good afternoon. Bye bye.

JR – Alright! Bye bye!
APPENDIX B. EMAIL CORRESPONDENCE TO JAKE RUNESTAD

1/16/2021

Dear Jake, how are you? I hope you are well, safe and healthy!

As you told me to contact you if I had more questions, here they are:

1 - what was your criteria regarding the order of the pieces in the American Triptych? When executed as a Triptych, would you prefer them to be executed in the same order as published (Reflections, The Peace of Wild Things, Come to The Woods) or the conductor could change that?

2 - you know my final project is a Conductor’s Guide to the American Triptych. In our interview, you told me about the importance of the right rhythms (for example, triplets versus duplets). What else do you believe should be addressed in a Conductor’s Guide to this cycle?

Thank you so much!

Néviton Barros

(he/him/his)
1/18/2021

Hi Néviton,

1. The works should be performed in the order I have indicated — this is not optional. There are many reasons for this, but essentially it’s the strongest musical and dramatic form. It also moves us westward across the United States from Thoreau (Massachusetts) to Berry (Kentucky) to Muir (California).

2. That’s a huge question and there are so many possible details to discuss. Here are a few of the techniques that are crucial to the performance of my work (and that are the most common elements I address when working with an ensemble):

- Detailed attention to text, prosody, and shape of line.
- Detailed attention to triplets as a stretched element VERY different from a duple rhythmic value. This is taken from my jazz background and triplets should always be felt on the back end of the beat, relaxed, stretched. This is where they really shine as a rhythmic element that creates tension and counters the feeling of the duple rhythm. Another important element of this is to clearly distinguish from duple rhythms for the clarity of text. English is not a strictly duple language, and we speak in a mixture of duple and triple rhythms. Therefore, when desiring clarity of text, I utilize this duple/triple difference in rhythmic values in order to bring attention to and clarify the prosody of the text.
- Temporal shifts are a vital element of the form of each work. Ritardandi are not merely optional, they must be adhered to and executed with intention. This
requires specific rehearsal time utilizing subdivisions of the beat as the tempo shifts so that each performer FEELS the slowing down in relation to the larger beat.

- Embodiment of the dramatic character of a musical line or section. This is never music that one just mindlessly sings — rather, it requires deep engagement with the character of any given moment, like any human would do when they experience an emotion.

Let me know if you have anything else!

Jake Runestad

Composer & Conductor

jakerunestad.com
1/29/2021

Dear Jake, how are you? This project is building very beautifully! I need to ask you something:

LSU had done Come to the Woods, so we have that piece in our Library. Also, Dr. Dickson has done the whole American Triptych with his professional choir, Coro Vocati. So, for my Lecture Recital, we are using those scores.

But, for the document I’m writing, I need your permission to have some musical examples taken from the scores. Also, I need your permission to attach at the end of the document the files you sent me during our interview: the document with the text and first musical drafts of “Come to the Woods”, the musical drafts of the beginning of “Peace of Wild Things” and the text and first musical drafts of “Reflections.”

If I have your consent to add those in my final document, I would need to purchase just one copy of the three pieces, because all scores I have are hugely marked, so I just can’t use them in a document, as musical examples. Your page does not allow me to purchase only one copy of each piece, so I’m not sure how can I do that.

Thank you so much again!

Néviton Barros

(he/him/his)
2/1/2021

Néviton,

I'm attaching my assistant Sarah to help with this. Sarah — can you license Néviton all three scores of the American Triptych gratis?

Can you please tell me more about how you'll be using my manuscripts in the document?

--

Jake Runestad
composer & conductor

jakerunestad.com
2/1/2021

Thank you, Jake!

In the chapters where I describe the way you use the text to compose the music, I mention the manuscripts, so I would like to have them at the end of the document as an appendix. Let me know if that’s okay with you. I know how precious those manuscripts are for you.

The project is growing up in shape! I couldn’t get an interview with Craig Hella Johnson, but there is a video recording of the American Triptych conducted by Dr. Kevin Fenton, and he agreed to give me an interview, and that really helped me a lot in the final stage of the document.

Thank you so much, not only for your music, but for allowing me to write about it, and your kindness.

Néviton Barros
(he/him/his)

Sent from my iPad
2/2/2021

Thanks. My preference would be for you to use the images of the text manuscripts only (not my music notation manuscripts). I shared those for your own insight into the writing process but would prefer that they aren't public at this time.

Best,

--

Jake Runestad
composer & conductor

jakerunestad.com
Libretto

Another glorious day, the air as delicious to the lungs as nectar to the tongue.

The mountain winds are bestowed with love on the forests. The winds touch every tree, not one is forgotten; the winds bless the forests with ineffable beauty and harmony.

The mountain winds kiss the forests with love.

--- May touch every tree, not one is forgotten.

The day was intensely pure, warm and balmy and full of sparkling sunshine, and at the same time enlivened with one of the most bracing wind-storms conceivable.

When the storm began to sound, I pushed out into the woods to enjoy it.

...it occurred to me that I should climb one of the trees for a wider look and to hear the Aeolian music of its topmost needles.

I reached the top of this tree and never before had I enjoyed such exhilaration and never before did I enjoy so noble an exhilaration of motion.

The sounds of the storm were glorious (with) wild exuberance of light and motion - booming like waterfalls, now rising to a shrill, whistling hiss, now falling to a silky murmur; the rustling, the keen metallic click of leaf on leaf - bending and swirling backward and forward, round and round, while I clung with firm muscles... in this wild sea of pines...

---

The storm-tones died away, and, turning toward the east, I beheld the countless hosts of the forests hushed and tranquil. The setting sun filled them with amber light, and seemed to say, "My peace I give unto you." - hymn tune

[Climb the mountains and get their good tidings, Nature's peace will flow into you as sunshine flows into trees. The winds will blow their own freshness into you and the storms their energy, while cares will drop off like autumn leaves. As age comes on, one source of enjoyment after another is closed, but nature's sources never fail.]

Come to the woods, for here is rest.
Another glorious day, the air as delicious to the lungs as nectar to the tongue.

The day was full of sparkling sunshine, and at the same time enlivened with one of the most bracing wind-storms.

when the storm began to sound
I pushed bold into the woods to enjoy it.

It occurred to me that I should climb one of the trees for a wider look.

The sounds of the storm were glorious with wild exuberance of light and motion—bending and swirling, backward and forward, round and round, (while I clung with firm muscles) in this wild sea of pines.

The storm tones died away, and turning toward the east,
I beheld the trees hushed and tranquil.
The setting sun filled them with amber light, and seemed to say,

"My peace I give unto you."

Come to the woods, for here is rest.
I. OPENING

Another glorious day, the air as delicious
to the lungs as nectar to the tongue.

The mountain winds are bestowed with love
on the forests.
The winds touch every tree, not one is forgotten;
the winds bless the forests
with ineffable beauty and harmony.

II. TREES

The day was intensely pure, warm and balmy
and full of sparkling sunshine,
and at the same time enlivened with one of
the most bracing wind-storms conceivable.

When the storm began to sound,
I pushed out into the woods to enjoy it.
Nature has always something rare to show us,
and the danger to life and limb is hardly greater than
crouching beneath a _______ roof.

(Music - change of thought - bouncy, curious)

…it occurred to me that I should climb one of the trees
for a wider outlook and get my ear close to the Aeolian music of its topmost needles.

III. STORM
(climbing up the tree) (USE AEOLIAN MUSIC - tree theme)
(Begin storm music)

I experienced no difficulty in reaching the top of this tree
and never before did I enjoy so noble an exhilaration of motion.
The slender tops flapped and swished in the passionate torrent,
bending and swirling backward and forward, round and round, tracing
indescribable combinations of vertical and horizontal curves,
while I clung with firm muscles…in this wild sea of pines…
(in the storm, have the choir’s voices swaying as if at the top of the tree - half step motion in either direction from a central pitch)

in this wild sea of pines...
I kept my lofty perch for hours, frequently closing my eyes, to enjoy the music by itself, or to feast on the delicious fragrance that was streaming by.

When the storm began to abate, I dismounted and sauntered down through the calming woods.
The storm-tones died away, and, turning toward the east, I beheld the countless hosts of the forests hushed and tranquil, towering above one another on the slopes of the hills like a devout audience.
The setting sun filled them with amber light, and seemed to say, while they listened, "My peace I give unto you."

We all travel the Milky Way together, trees and men; but it never occurred to me until this storm-day, that trees are travelers, in the ordinary sense.
They make many journeys, but our own little journeys, away and back again, are only little more than tree-wavings.

As I gazed on the impressive scene, the so-called ruin of the storm was forgotten, and never before did these noble woods appear so fresh, so joyous, so immortal.

IV. Final

When we contemplate the whole globe as one great dewdrop, striped and dotted with continents and islands, flying through space with other stars all singing and shining together as one, the whole universe appears as an infinite storm of beauty.

Climb the mountains and get their good tidings, Nature’s peace will flow into you as sunshine flows into trees. The winds will blow their own freshness into you and the storms their energy, while cares will drop off like autumn leaves. As age comes on, one source of enjoyment after another is closed, but nature’s sources never fail.

Come to the woods, for here is rest.
Another glorious day.  
the air as delicious to the lungs — don't get quieter at end of day as nectar to the tongue.  

The day was full of sparkling sunshine  
and at the same time enlivened  
with one of the most bracing wind storms.  

The mountain winds bless the forests with love.  
They touch every tree, not one is forgotten.  
When the storm began to sound  
I climbed one of the trees?  
for a wider look.  

I pushed out into the woods to enjoy it.  

It occurred to me that I should climb  
one of the trees for a wider look:  

The sounds of the storm were glorious  
with wild exuberance of light and motion —  
bending and swirling, backward and forward, round and round,  
while I clung with firm muscles  
in this wild sea of pines.  

The storm tones died away  
and turning toward the east,  
I beheld the trees hushed and tranquil  
The setting sun filled them with amber light  
and seemed to say,  
"Come to the woods, for here is rest."
Journal Excerpts - Henry David Thoreau

There is all the romance of my youth in the moment in music. Heaven lies about us, as in our infancy. There is nothing so wild and extravagant that it does not make true. It makes a dream my only real experience, and prompts faith to such elasticity that only the incredible can satisfy it. All that I have imagined of heroism, it reminds me of and assures me of. It is a life uniled, a life beyond life, where at length my years will pass. I look under the lids of time.

My desire for knowledge is intermittent; but my desire to commune with the spirit of the universe, to be intoxicated with the fumes, call it of that divine nectar, to bear my head through atmospheres and over heights unknown to my feet, is perennial and constant.

We do not commonly live our life out and full; we do not fill all our pores with our blood; we do not inspire and expire fully and entirely enough. So that the wave, the comber, of each inspiration shall break on our extremest shores, rolling 'til it meets the sand which bounds us, and the sound of the surf comes back to us

Might not a bellows assist us to breathe? That our breathing should create a wind on a calm day! We live but a fraction of our life. Why do we not let on the flood, raise the gates, and set all our wheels in motion? He that has ears to hear, let him hear.

If thou art a writer, write as if time were short, for it is indeed short at the longest. Improve each occasion when thy soul is reached. Drain the cup of inspiration to its last dregs.

To be calm, to be serene! There is the calmness of the lake when there is not a breath of wind; there is the calmness of a stagnant pool. So it is with us. Sometimes we are clarified and calmed healthily, as we never were before. In our lives, I mean, or, by some unconscious obedience to the air and water so that we become like a still lake of purest crystal and without an effort our depths are revealed to ourselves, and all the world goes by us and is reflected in our deeps. Such clarty! Obtained by such pure means! by simple living, by honesty of purpose.

To the same man, the world is a musical instrument. The very touch affords an exquisite pleasure.

Must be out-of-doors enough to get experience of wholesome reality, as ballast to thought and sentiment. Health requires this relaxation. This aimless life. This life in the present. Let a man have thought what he will of Nature in the house, she will still be novel outdoors. I keep out of doors for the sake of the mineral, vegetable and animal in me.

My thought is a part of the meaning of the world, and hence I use a part of the world as a symbol to express my thought.

After whatever revolutions in my moods and experience, when I come forth at evening, as from years of confinement to the house, I see the few stars which make the constellation of the Lesser Bear in the same relative position—the everlasting geometry of the stars. How incredible to be described are these bright points which appear in the blue sky as the darkness increases, said to be other worlds, like the berries on the hill when the summer is ripe! Even the ocean of birds, even the regions of the ether, are studded with isles. Far in this ethereal sea lie the Hesperian isles, unseen by day, but when the darkness comes their fires are seen from this shore, as Columbus saw the fires of San Salvador.

It is worth the while to apply what wisdom one has to the conduct of his life, surely I find myself oftenest wise.
in little things and foolish in great ones. That I may accomplish some particular pretty affair well, I live my whole life coarsely. A broad margin of leisure is as beautiful in a man's life as in a book. Haste makes waste, no less in life than in housekeeping. Keep the time, observe the hours of the universe, not of the cares. What are threescore years and ten hurriedly and coarsely lived to moments of divine leisure in which your life is coincident with the life of the universe? We live too fast and coarsely, just as we eat too fast and do not know the true savor ever of our food. We consult our will and our understanding and the expectations of men, not our genius. I can impose upon myself tasks which will crush me for life and prevent all expansion, and this I am but too inclined to do.

One moment of life costs many hours, hours not of business but of preparation and invitation. Yet the man who does not betake himself at once and and desperately to sawing is called a loafer, though he may be knocking at the doors of heaven all the while, which shall surely be opened to him. That aim in life is highest which requires the highest and finest discipline. How much, what infinite, leisure it requires, as of a lifetime, to appreciate a single phenomenon? You must camp down beside it as for life, having reached your land of promise, and give yourself wholly to it. It must stand for the whole world to you, symbolical of all things. The least partisanship is your own defect of sight and cheapens the experience fatally. Unless the humming of a gnat is as the music of the spheres, they are naught to me. It is not communications to serve for a history—which are sciences—but the great story itself, that cheers and satisfies us.

Thoreau Work

Open with the busyness of life—a poem about
the chase, the rush, the stress.

Then move to "To be calm, to be serene! Here is the calmness..."
Thoreau - Reflections

I. Let on the Flood
We do not commonly live our life out and full; we do not fill all our pores with our blood; we do not inspire and expire fully and entirely enough, so that the wave of each inspiration shall break on our farthest shores, rolling 'till it meets the sand which bounds us, and the sound of the surf comes back [to us].

We live but a fraction of our life. Why do we not let on the flood, raise the gates, and set all our wheels in motion? 

II. Reflections

To be calm, to be serene! There is the calmness of the lake when there is not a breath of wind; so it is with us. Sometimes we are clarified and calmed as we never were before. We become like a still lake of purest crystal and without an effort our depths are revealed to ourselves. All the world goes by us and is reflected in our deeps. Such clarity!

Obtained by such pure means! By simple living, by honesty of purpose.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


VITA

Néviton Barros, born in Brasília, DF, Brazil, started his formal music education at Escola de Música de Brasília in 1993, where he sang in the only professional choir in the city, madrigal de Brasília. He studied voice performance under Nida Gibran. He received his Bachelor in Choir Conducting at the Universidade de Brasília (UnB) in 2002. After that, he moved to Peru, where he served as assistant director of Coro Nacional del Perú, Peru’s only professional choir. In 2012, he moved to New York, where he served as Music Director of IBOC (International Brazilian Opera Company) while pursuing his Master of Arts in Choir and Orchestral Conducting at Hunter (CUNY) College, (2016). While working in Chile he discovered a strong desire to complete his formal musical training as a conductor. Returning to the U. S. in 2018, he began his DMA degree in choral conducting at the Louisiana State University. During his studies he served as assistant conductor of A Cappella Choir, Chamber Singers, and the Tiger Glee Club in addition to his work as teacher assistant for choral literature classes and choral librarian. After graduation, he plans to further his career in performance and teaching.