

A Composer's Reflections

LEE HOIBY

Let me start by telling you how I came to write anthems. My studies at the Curtis Institute in Philadelphia required me to master counterpoint. In some schools that means Bach-style usage—I had already studied that in university so I was not happy that my teacher was making me go through it all over again. But I was in for a surprise—I had to do it à la Palestrina, which was much harder, like swimming with one hand tied behind your back. In the very first lesson my teacher, Gian Carlo Menotti, said to me: "These are not exercises. This is music." Species counterpoint is all I did for two years, daily lessons and assignments; by and by I began to see where it was leading. The swimmer eventually feels he has been given an extra pair of arms, and I learned how to lead voices among other voices, several lines at a time, and make it interesting for the singers as well as for the audience. For me it is counterpoint that gives music its most profound richness. It has always struck me that Schubert, shortly before his death, with so many unassailable masterpieces behind him, felt his lack of formal training in counterpoint and sought lessons. It is easy to feel that one can do without counterpoint; luckily I was forced to it at an early age. I found those first two years the most rewarding of my studies.

Afterwards, when I started out on my own, I wanted to write some a cappella songs. Not a piano piece, though I was a pianist; nothing for orchestra, though I loved orchestration. Just some short four-part songs. I used the songs of Shakespeare's Feste—the clown in Twelfth Night—calling them "Songs of the Fool." The first one, "O Mistress Mine," is a double canon throughout. The second song, "Come Away, Death," is I think very beautiful and (since you asked me to discuss liturgy) I think it is suitable for funerals. I sent these songs around to conductors I had met, and Paul Callaway—then music director of the National Cathedral in Washington—wrote back enthusiastically. He didn't perform them, but he did ask me to write a cantata for his cathedral. That was "A Hymn of the Nativity," which I will discuss later. It was well received, and got me my first strong recognition from a major critic. My publisher took notice, and right away he dreamed up a choral project for me. It was to write fifty-two anthems, one for each Sunday of the year, all on biblical texts. He had the crazy idea that this could significantly augment my income. And so I began to write anthems, something I would never have thought of because I wasn't very religious.

As it turned out, my anthems have never augmented my income very much, because the organ parts are too difficult. Thousands of churches with limited organists never did them. The good news is that the biggest churches with the best organists did do them. Other good news is that I love to write them. The anthem-a-week project petered out after only two, although several more came afterwards. The first was "Let This Mind be in You," which gets done quite a lot because it's fairly easy. Next came "Inherit the Kingdom," whose text is very dear to me. It deals with the parable of the sheep and the goats, and ends with the line, "Inasmuch as ye have done it unto the least of these thy brethren, ye have done it unto me." Twenty years later I took a closer look at "Inherit the Kingdom" and decided to revise it, particularly the baritone solo, the voice of Jesus ("I was a stranger and ye took me in"). I slowed it way down, so that the words of Jesus are now framed in a special window, and they become much more touching.

Here I might mention a phenomenon that the composer has to deal with: revision and its effect on the performer. The performer who has learned a piece is often thrown for a loop if the composer comes along and changes it. My friend David Garvey, Leontyne Price's perennial
accompanist, told me that for her changing a note was like breaking a bone. Once I changed something in a song she sang and she never sang it again.

I sent the new version of "Inherit the Kingdom" to certain people, including the music director at the Washington Cathedral, who had done the first version many times. To my astonishment he refused to use the revision, and then actually went ahead and recorded the piece in its original form.

I didn't write another anthem on a biblical text until 1988 when I wrote "Psalm 92: The Lord is King" (to some people that's Psalm 93). It's quite a substantial piece, about nine minutes long. It was commissioned by the Cathedral of St. John the Divine on the two hundredth anniversary of the New York diocese, and was sung by the combined choirs of the city, a chorus of nearly one thousand, including many children. It was a challenge because I had to think about a large mass of voices and a reverberation time of nine seconds. This work has a sort of minimalist ending—an ad libitum repetition of two contrapuntal lines to the words "until the end of time...for all eternity." The first performance was too slow because I notated it wrong, and so I had to rewrite it. The sound is quite impressive when it deals with "Greater than the roar of mighty waters."

I have written several anthems to texts by the seventeenth century divines, poets upon whom all English-speaking choral writers depend. Three of my earliest settings, that got me rolling in the community of church musicians, were of texts by John Donne—"Hear Us, O Hear Us, Lord" (which uses portions of two different poems), "At the Round Earth's Imagined Corners" (one of the Holy Sonnets, it was commissioned by the American Guild of Organists), and "Ascension," written for the dedication of the Gloria in Excelsis Tower of the National Cathedral; this was performed outdoors at the foot of the tower. It has a large instrumental ensemble accompaniment of winds and brass, and makes quite a racket. There is also a smaller version for brass and organ. Recently I set George Herbert's "The Call" for Christ Church Cathedral in Lexington, Kentucky.

My most substantial choral work derived from the poetry of the English divines is "A Hymn of the Nativity," a thirty minute cantata for chorus and orchestra, with soprano and baritone solos, first performed at the National Cathedral on New Year's Eve, 1960. The text is one of Richard Crashaw's most famous and beautiful works. I wrote furiously, got about three quarters of the way through, and then hit a brick wall. I had finished the one dark moment in the piece, and could not go on. What got me through was listening to Handel's "Messiah," an inexhaustibly generous work. Then I wrote the section, happily not too Handelian in style; it was extracted and published separately (with organ accompaniment) as "The Offering." Naturally it is often performed at the Offertory. The entire cantata was immediately published, and received an important hearing at a major national convocation of choral directors. Unfortunately someone rather unprepared replaced the conductor at the last minute; this one overlooked an empty measure at the climax and allowed the work to collapse into confusion. A composer's nightmare. Later on, the publisher went belly-up, and all its music was thrown into a warehouse, and then turned into mulch. If you come across a copy of the original edition you will see that a wag of an engraver changed the composition date from 1960 to 1900. That rather peeved me. I have come to feel that the piece would be improved with the addition of an interlude in the final fugue, briefly bringing back the solo voices. I have the Crashaw text for such a revision, and I'm only waiting for the opportunity to arise.
The Riverside Church in New York gave me the chance to set another poem of Crashaw's in memory of Tony Bufano, a chorister there, for Easter Sunday, 1995. "St Mary Magdalene" is a piece I really loved writing, and have heard only once. It calls for a mezzo-soprano solo, and like many of my anthems has an arrangement for brass quintet. Could a non-Catholic church perform it, calling it "Mary Magdalene" instead of "St Mary Magdalene"? It includes lines like this:

Not in the evening's eyes
When they red with weeping are
For the sun that dies,
Sits sorrow with a face so fair.
Nowhere but here did ever meet
Sweetness so sad, sadness so sweet.

Some years ago, Peter Fyfe, a Nashville church musician, called me out of the blue and asked if I would write a Mag/Nunc (Magnificat plus Nunc dimittis) for him. I had no idea what a Mag/Nunc was, but I said I would be delighted. (I might mention that I'm from a Protestant background; I'm what you might call a lapsed Lutheran.) So I looked up the words of the Mag/Nunc and found them full of spirit, charm, and loveliness. I had never paid much attention to any Magnificat later than Bach's, and didn't know the tradition, so I had to filter the words through my own responses. Fyfe liked the way I took pains to write something substantial for the Doxology—twice in fact, both in the Mag and the Nunc. Fortunately, by the time I wrote this piece I had come to believe in the world of the Spirit, so it felt natural to pay special attention to these words. Spoken, the Doxology is almost a perfunctory mantra, but if you have a wonderful chorus, why not treat it like any other beautiful text?

A few years ago I wrote a "Gloria" commissioned by Thomas Gibbs in Birmingham, who recently recorded it beautifully. There's really nothing much to say about a Gloria. It's like the Doxology, very challenging if you hope to write glorious music.

Another piece of mine that is arguably liturgical and which I've only heard once is "Dona Nobis Pacem," commissioned by The Colorado Children's Chorus. These three words are sung in twenty-six different languages. I've thought of enlarging it to full chorus.

I have also enjoyed setting spiritual texts by un-churchly poets for church chorus. We have organized religion to thank for so much of our choral repertory, yet it's a pity that texts appropriate for church services are so limited by the rules of the liturgy. I am continually trying to foist non-liturgical texts on churches that come to me for commissions; quite often I get away with it. I'll mention a few: for instance, my Shelley setting, "On the Mountain"—although maybe there's some problem about Shelley's being an atheist. Then I have very simple settings of two poems from Blake's Songs of Innocence, "The Lamb" and "The Shepherd." These two also exist as songs for solo voice. Another unchurchly poet I've foisted on the laity is Walt Whitman, whose poems comprise my gradually accruing choral magnum opus, "A Whitman Service." One section was written on a church commission, a setting of passages from a magnificent Whitman poem called "The Sleepers." This anthem I call "Measureless Love." I might mention just for fun that there was a bit of an incident. "Measureless Love" was to be performed by one of New York's most distinguished churches, St. Thomas's, for the two-hundredth anniversary of the
American Guild of Organists, which was having its convention in New York City a few years ago. However a non-musical church authority rejected it because of this line in the text: "The bare arm of the girl crosses the bare breast of her lover." Fortunately it found itself another slot in the festivities.

The other anthem that is part of "A Whitman Service" is "A Song of Joys"; to my mind this can serve in place of any Jubilate in a church. The graduating class of the Westminster Choir College commissioned it. "A Whitman Service" also includes five songs for baritone solo, one of which is a setting of "O Captain! My Captain!," the great Lincoln elegy. I was recently asked to write a piece for Marion Van Der Loo's church in Springfield, Illinois, where Abraham Lincoln gave a very moving address just before he left for Washington to take office. This is known as "Farewell to Springfield"; I used it for my text, and have included it in "A Whitman Service." The piece ends with a ten-minute cantata for baritone, mezzo, and chorus on "For You O Democracy." The entire work is intended for the concert hall although, as I have said, several sections originated as, and still can be used as, anthems, available in organ, and brass-plus-organ, arrangements.

One of my most widely used short choral pieces is "Where the Music Comes From" (for SA and SATB), originally a song. I wrote the words as a kind of folk song—when I wrote it I called it my Cat Stevens song—for private use by my friends in a New Age consciousness-raising group that I belonged to in the seventies. I was prevailed upon to include it in a group of my published songs. I thought this was inappropriate, but the next thing I knew Leontyne Price was singing it in Carnegie Hall.

Now I'm going to talk about "Hymn to the New Age," of which you have all been given copies. This anthem had a weird kind of genesis. Back in the seventies I was writing theater music every season for the American Conservatory Theater in San Francisco. The director, Bill Ball, often had grandiose ideas that included music. When he staged Shakespeare's Richard the Third he wanted to end with a great chorus of good triumphing over evil. He said he wanted a piece that reached for the highest feeling of triumph, and after it reached that it should go even higher. And when it got higher, it should go still higher, then higher again. I would never have written such a piece if he hadn't said that. But I did my best, and wrote what you will hear now.

[A recording was played.]

After I had written all the music for this production, and recorded it all with full orchestra, I went back home to New York while they were still rehearsing the play in San Francisco. Dozens of costumes were already made for the last big scene of the play; it was all white and gold, and bathed in sunshine. Two young boys were supposed to be blowing big long trumpets at the edge of the stage. Then I found out that they had to abandon the whole last scene because the chorus couldn’t follow the tape! I use ample rubato when it’s called for, generous retards, etc., and when the company chorus started rehearsing with the tape, they couldn’t follow it. So they had to abandon the whole thing, chorus, costumes, trumpets, and all. I felt pretty bad about it, as if I had somehow failed them. Eventually I added new words and published it as "Hymn to the New Age." Since it was written for an amateur chorus, it’s good for almost any celebration. I also made an arrangement for full symphony orchestra. Larry King (who did the brass arrangement) performed it for many years, every Fourth of July, at Trinity Church on Wall Street; it was even sung at the fiftieth anniversary of the United Nations in San Francisco’s Grace Cathedral. I saw this on television. It was much too slow.
It's usually too slow. It's rarely performed with any real rhythmic muscle, so it gets flabby. I have never yet heard it with the tempos I indicated. Even the performance we heard just now—by a widely known and respected conductor—is far under tempo. There's something about this music that makes people want to linger, hold back, stretch it out. But the piece is already stretched out; it's full of ritards, allargandos, ritenutos, and if you start too slow the whole thing begins to sound exaggerated and overblown. The beginning is marked 60, not 44 as you heard it, fully eight notches slower. The following allegro is marked 72, a pretty vigorous moving-ahead tempo, but what you heard was closer to 60. And still to come there are allargandos and meno mosso, several ritards, another meno mosso, a largamente and a ritenuto. No wonder the choir was red in the face at the end, as the conductor himself told me. Yet I have to admit it was effective despite the heavy-handed tempos. But I know it would have been even more effective if he had observed my markings.

Paul Callaway always observed metronome markings meticulously. He did a new piece of mine once, and I complained that he was going too fast. He said, "That's your metronome marking." He was right. I had marked it too fast. Well, it was a new piece. It takes a composer time to discover the best tempo. In a special way, he has to "learn" the piece he has written.

And it's true about tempi, that they don't always have to be the same. Think of Furtwängler and Toscanini as opposite ends of the spectrum. But in a slow piece, when you go eight degrees slower than the composer's marking, it just becomes heavy and turgid, and the chorus nearly dies in the loud sustained high passages.

Just once I would like to hear this piece my way. So could we just sing it through together? You all have copies of the music, and I have brought the tape of the orchestral accompaniment I made in San Francisco back in the seventies. It does not contain the first page of the music you have. I wrote that later. Therefore the orchestra will begin at the top of page 2. So could we please stand and do a bit of sight singing? I will do my best to conduct, and hope we won't have a train wreck.

[From the Q&A:]

First I speak the words to myself and try to discover the rhythms inside the words. Then, as much as I can, I try to absorb into myself the feelings of the words. The words are a big help. They give you the mood, the feeling, the structure; they do much of the work for me. All I have to do then is write the notes.

Menotti was my teacher, but I learned many great lessons from Barber as well. Once I spent the night at Capricorn, and Sam excused himself after dinner to work on a commission for the Library of Congress. Later when I went to bed he was still at it, and I listened with mounting perplexity as he played the same sequence of notes, over and over, for well over two hours; just a couple of measures, with occasionally the tiniest variations of rhythm and distribution. It sounded like the behavior of a morose child. I wondered if he were stuck or having a breakdown. The next morning I asked him what on earth he had been doing. He said, and I thought about these words for a long time, "I was looking for the right notes." (The piece was "Le Départ.") Like a hand on my shoulder it slowed me down considerably; it gave me permission to pursue refinement and revision. I still tend to revise even after publication when I see that I didn't get all the right notes.
Simplicity must be of the greatest refinement to stand out. No matter how simple the idea there are endless ways to express it, and one of them is the best.

I have no natural connection with the liturgy, or the pop music of my youth. The drab bare aesthetic of the Lutheran church completely turned me off. So did the dance bands I played in, because they played so badly. I remember as a child praying to have a real faith, an unshakable faith, but I didn't. I didn't have it. I prayed for it, even on my knees; I prayed, but I never did get it. So I finally gave up. Only in the seventies, through my involvement with a spiritual community, did I realize that I had a spirit.

In my late thirties I went through psychoanalysis, brought on by the fact that I ground my teeth in my sleep, and I didn't want to lose my teeth. I learned a great deal—yet in my forties I fell into a "dark night of the soul." So I went to search for answers because my life had suddenly turned on me, it didn't mean anything to me anymore. At that time I found the spiritual community that led me out of the dark night. It is called The Pathwork, and it exists in many countries.

I think of my tonal language as a vast musical river that has been flowing for centuries. Nothing can ever really disrupt it, not even Arnold Schoenberg [laughter]. It will continually flow, it is such a powerful form of human expression, coming out of the very physics of sound.

Lee Hoiby was born in Wisconsin in 1926. He studied composition at the Curtis Institute. His works have been recognized by awards and grants from the Guggenheim Foundation, the National Institute of Arts and Letters, the Ford Foundation, the Fulbright Commission and the National Endowment for the Arts. His principal works include the operas The Scarf (1958), A Month in the Country (1964), Summer and Smoke (1971), The Tempest (1986), and Romeo and Juliet (2004). He is also the composer of nearly 100 songs, as well as chamber music, music for orchestra, solo instruments, chorus, and the theater. He lives in upstate New York.