

Peter Boyer
On Music's Wings

For soprano and baritone soloists, mixed chorus, children's chorus and orchestra
Commissioned by Orange County's Pacific Symphony, Carl St.Clair, Music Director
in celebration of its 25th anniversary season

- I. **Silver Fanfare**
orchestra [4 minutes]
- II. **That Music Always Round Me** (Walt Whitman)
soprano and baritone soloists, mixed chorus, children's chorus, orchestra [7 minutes]
- III. **To Music** (Rainer Maria Rilke, translated by Stephen Mitchell)
soprano and baritone soloists, mixed chorus, children's chorus, orchestra [6 minutes]
- IV. **The Aim Was Song** (Robert Frost)
chamber chorus of 16 (John Alexander Singers), *a cappella* [3-1/2 minutes]
- V. **Music** (Conrad Aiken)
mixed chorus, children's chorus, orchestra [5 minutes]
- VI. **On Music's Wings: *An anthem for children*** (Peter Boyer)
soprano and baritone soloists, mixed chorus, children's chorus, orchestra, joined by massed children's choirs
[4-1/2 minutes]

On Music's Wings: notes on the project and the work by Peter Boyer (2004)

I have long admired the Pacific Symphony and Carl St.Clair for their high artistic standards, innovative programming, and commitment to contemporary composers. Having attended many of their concerts, I've become accustomed to the virtuoso sound of this orchestra. So to be asked to compose a work for them was an exciting prospect, and the fact that the request was for a large work to help conclude their 25th anniversary season was thrilling. I have also admired the Pacific Symphony's commitment to its community and to education, so the request to include elementary, intermediate, and high school performers in this celebratory work was not surprising—though it was daunting, as I'd never previously attempted to compose for children or young performers.

In the course of the collaborative process which defined this project, many questions had to be asked and answered, and the nature of the piece defined. What kind of work would be composed? What forces in addition to the orchestra might be employed? If vocal, what would be the texts? What would be the theme? At an early meeting with Carl St.Clair, I asked him what he would consider to be the ideal outcome for this performance. His answer: "Give the audience an uplifting experience." The attempt to do this became my defining principle.

The earliest decision made was that I would compose an "anthem" for children that would celebrate the special power of music in our lives, which could be performed by children throughout Orange County in numerous school concerts, prior to joining together on this occasion. I decided that the most logical solution was to make this anthem the finale of the work, providing an opportunity for all the performers and children to come together in a closing celebration. The goal of including high school singers from throughout Orange County was also expressed, and it was John Alexander who suggested that an All-County honors chorus be assembled, joined by the sixteen John Alexander Singers, providing talented high school students an opportunity to sing side-by-side with seasoned professionals. Invitations to high school choral directors throughout the county to each nominate a quartet of their best students yielded the terrific group of young singers that joins the orchestra. The All-American Boys Chorus, an expertly trained group, was engaged as the on-stage children's vocal component. I thought that soprano and baritone soloists would nicely round out the vocal forces.

As the event was to be a Celebration of Music, it seemed fitting for that to be the work's theme. Many weeks of searching for suitable texts led me to this group of poems by Whitman, Rilke, Frost, and Aiken, each of which celebrates music in its own way. It is a reflection of music's unique power that it can draw such diverse and celebratory poetic responses. The final result is a 32-minute work in six movements.

The first movement, *Silver Fanfare*, is named in honor of the Pacific Symphony's silver anniversary. I wanted one movement of the work to feature the orchestra alone, and showcase its virtuoso abilities. And of course, I thought it appropriate to begin a birthday celebration with a bang. What more natural vehicle than a fanfare? This movement is marked "fast, energetic, jubilant," and maintains its driving tempo from the first note to the last.

The second movement, *That Music Always Round Me*, sets a late, short poem by Walt Whitman, from the final edition of *Leaves of Grass*, his major work. As soon as I realized that I would have large vocal forces at my disposal, I knew that some Whitman text had to be included. There is a reason that his words have been set so often by American composers: it is wonderful, musical text, challenging for its asymmetry and extravagant cataloguing of all which he observed. This particular poem is rife with musical imagery, and I used these lines as the catalyst for tone-painting, employing soprano and baritone soloists, full chorus, and children's chorus with the orchestra. In the choral sections which open and close the movement, I tried to capture Whitman's exuberance and celebration of all that he saw around him: "But now the chorus I hear and am elated!"

The third movement, *To Music*, stands in stark contrast to the second. Where Whitman is exuberant and extroverted, Rilke's paean to music is delicate, mystical, ethereal. The imagery of the language, in Stephen Mitchell's translation, is stunning. Music is equated with "breathing of statues" and "silence of paintings." This led me to attempt to create a mood of timelessness. The children's chorus and full chorus sing simple, chant-like lines and harmonies, while the strings play high above them in delicate harmonics. These lines are preceded and punctuated by bell-like sonorities which interlock in a complex web, produced by two glockenspiels, crotales (tiny tuned cymbals), vibraphone, harp, and celesta (a bell-like keyboard instrument). For me, the heart of the poem lies in three words, which follow the question: "O you the transformation of feelings into what?" The answer: "into audible landscape."

The fourth movement, *The Aim Was Song*, contrasts with the rest of the work by featuring an unaccompanied chamber choir. This movement showcases the sixteen virtuoso voices of the John Alexander Singers. The vocal writing here is far greater in difficulty than in the other movements, and the harmony much more complex. This early, little-known poem by Robert Frost asserts that it was man who came along to tell the wind of its true purpose: the making of song, or music.

The fifth movement sets a short Conrad Aiken poem simply entitled *Music*, which I was pleased to discover. As in the Rilke, there is beautiful, delicate musical imagery at work. Aiken's use of descriptive metaphors for the oboe and flute led me to write solo lines for those instruments in the movement's opening and closing sections. I was struck by the unexpected description of the heart as that "from which all horrors come," and the music turns darker and more animated in this section. Oboe, flute, strings, and chorus "wave the world away" to end the movement.

Though the decision to write an anthem for children as the work's finale was easy, the task of finding the right text proved difficult. The text had to celebrate the role of music in our lives, and its ability to bring us together. It had to be appropriate for children to sing, in both its message and tone, and it had to lend itself to being set to a straightforward melody that would be easily memorable. After many weeks of fruitless searching for an appropriate poem, I decide to write the text myself, and take the approach of a kind of pop ballad (with, of course, a few hundred more performers than a pop ballad usually employs!). At the same time, I'd been asked to create a one-sentence theme that might provide some visual imagery to children who would be invited to create artwork for the event in a county-wide call for art. Reflection on music's power to transport us yielded the thought: "Together we fly on music's wings." This became the theme of the call for art, and you will see many of these children's wonderful pictures projected during this finale. *On Music's Wings* became the title of both the children's anthem, and the larger work.

For the finale, the 300 or so onstage performers are joined by some 600 elementary and intermediate school children, from school districts throughout Orange County. In the course of my residency activities with the Pacific Symphony throughout this project, I have had the opportunity to visit a number of these schools, and meet many of these children personally. Having never composed for children before, I was unprepared for the joy I felt in hearing them sing my music. I have never experienced anything quite like it. There is something pure, honest, and true about the way children sing, and to have the chance to work with so many of them has been unforgettable for me. You will find in this program the words and melody of *On Music's Wings*. At the end of this anthem, Maestro St.Clair will invite you, the audience, to join in singing. Feel free to join the children, and raise your voices!

A composer only puts notes on a page, and performers and supporters are required to bring the music to life. With a project of this scope and complexity, this music could not have been created and heard without the dedicated efforts of many people. I'd like to take the opportunity to thank many of them here. Thanks to John Forsyte, Pam French, Jim Medvitz, Janice Johnson, John Alexander, Rich Messenger, Wesley Martin, and all the staff members, Board members, and volunteers at the Pacific Symphony and the Pacific Chorale. Thanks to all the performers: the wonderful Symphony musicians, the high school singers, the John Alexander Singers, the All-American Boys Chorus, Shana Blake Hill and Douglas Webster. Thanks to every one of the Orange County children who sang, and to all their terrific choral directors. Special thanks to Carl St.Clair, whose vision and musicianship continue to inspire me.

On Music's Wings
Texts

I. Silver Fanfare
orchestral

II. That Music Always Round Me

That music always round me, unceasing, unbeginning, yet long untaught I did not hear,
But now the chorus I hear and am elated,
A tenor, strong, ascending with power and health, with glad notes of daybreak I hear,
A soprano at intervals sailing buoyantly over the tops of immense waves,
A transparent base shuddering lusciously under and through the universe,
The triumphant tutti, the funeral wailings with sweet flutes and violins, all these I fill myself with,
I hear not the volumes of sound merely, I am moved by the exquisite meanings,
I listen to the different voices winding in and out, striving, contending with fiery vehemence to
 excel each other in emotion;
I do not think the performers know themselves—but now I think I begin to know them.

—Walt Whitman (1819-1892)
From *Leaves of Grass* (1891-92)

III. To Music

Music: breathing of statues. Perhaps:
silence of paintings. You language where all language
ends. You time
standing vertically on the motion of mortal hearts.

Feelings for whom? O you the transformation
of feelings into what?—: into audible landscape.
You stranger: music. You heart-space
grown out of us. The deepest space in us,
which, rising above us, forces its way out,—
holy departure:
when the innermost point in us stands
outside, as the most practiced distance, as the other
side of the air:
pure,
boundless,
no longer habitable.

—Rainer Maria Rilke (1875-1926)
(1918), translated by Stephen Mitchell (1982)
Used by permission of Stephen Mitchell

IV. The Aim Was Song

Before man came to blow it right
 The wind once blew itself untaught,
And did its loudest day and night
 In any rough place where it caught.

Man came to tell it what was wrong:
 It hadn't found the place to blow;
It blew too hard—the aim was song.
 And listen—how it ought to go!

He took a little in his mouth,

And held it long enough for north
To be converted into south,
And then by measure blew it forth.

By measure. It was word and note,
The wind the wind had meant to be—
A little through the lips and throat.
The aim was song—the wind could see.

—Robert Frost (1874-1963)
From *The Poetry of Robert Frost*, Henry Holt and Company
First published in *The Measure*, 1921 (public domain)

V. Music

The calyx of the oboe breaks,
silver and soft the flower it makes.
And next, beyond, the flute-notes seen
now are white and now are green.

What are these sounds, what daft device,
mocking at flame, mimicking ice?
Musicians, will you never rest
from strange translation of the breast?

The heart, from which all horrors come,
grows like a vine, its gourd a drum;
the living pattern sprawls and climbs
eager to bear all worlds and times:

trilling leaf and tinkling grass
glide into darkness clear as glass;
then the musicians cease to play
and the world is waved away.

—Conrad Aiken (1889-1973)
From *Collected Poems*, Oxford University Press
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VI. On Music's Wings *An anthem for children*

There is a place where our spirits can journey;
There is a place that's inside us;
There is a place where we all stand together;
There are no walls to divide us.
Where is this place? Let us tell you the answer:
Listen and you will hear.
It is the place only music can take us;
Just let the sounds of our voices lead you there.

Now let us find the voice within us;
Now let us hear the song it sings;
Now let us travel on together—
Sailing on music's wings.
Now let our spirits join in music;
Now let us share the gift it brings;
Come, won't you join us on our journey?—
Sailing on music's wings.

There is a sound that cannot be forgotten;
There is a sound that can reach us;
There is a sound that can bring us together;
There is so much it can teach us.
What is this sound that surrounds us with magic?
Can such a thing be so?
It is the sound that can only be music;
Join in our song as we sing, and you will know.

Now let us find the voice within us;
Now let us hear the song it sings;
Now let us travel on together—
Sailing on music's wings.
Now let our spirits join in music;
Now let us share the gift it brings;
Come, won't you join us on our journey?—
Sailing on music's wings.

—Words and music by Peter Boyer
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