

Sacred Place

Music by
Alex Berko

Words by
Wendell Berry • John Muir • William Stafford • Rabindranath Tagore

SATB Chorus, Violin, Violoncello, and Piano

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as part of the Joel Brauer Fund for New Music*

*First performance on March 31, 2023 at St. Martin's Lutheran Church, Austin, TX
by Conspirare conducted by Craig Hella Johnson*

PROGRAM NOTE

Sacred Place is an ecological service that connects the old with the new, the sacred with the secular, and the individual with their community. The outline of the work is a Jewish service. However, rather than Jewish prayers, the text is made up of various writers and thinkers who speak of the environment as a place of safety, comfort, and beauty. Written for SATB choir, piano, violin, and cello, the six-movement piece is at times a meditation and at times an impassioned prayer for the world we inhabit and share.

Duration: ca. 18 minutes

COMPOSER'S NOTE

While discussing this new work for Conspirare, Craig Johnson and I spoke about many ideas surrounding themes of community, nature, compassion, and healing. He expressed interest in creating a sonic space that united the singers and audience in collective feelings of compassion and grief. This idea resonated with me, and these communal aspects brought to mind the concept of a liturgical service.

Several composers throughout history have written liturgical works such as Masses, Requiems, and Cantatas. Many of these settings come from Christian liturgy with text in Latin. There are also many secular masses that are not written specifically for a liturgical purpose nor have text exclusively in Latin. In very recent years, composers such as Sarah Kirkland Snider (*Mass the Endangered*) and Carlos Simon (*Requiem for the Enslaved*) have further expanded these forms by weaving in elements of social justice.

I was inspired by my contemporaries to combine the old with the new and bring a piece of my identity and tradition into this work. As a result, rather than using the Christian liturgy, *Sacred Place* is based on the Jewish service. Additionally, while each movement is titled after a different pillar of a Jewish service, none of the text is in Hebrew. Instead, I stitched together the writings of several American environmentalists and poets who have spoken about their relationship with the earth.

Sacred Place is broken into 6 movements: Opening Prayer, *Amidah*, *Shema*, *Mi Shebeirach*, *Kaddish*, and Closing Prayer. Opening Prayer and Closing Prayer use the same serene Wendall Berry passage from the poem "The Porch over the River." *Amidah* (to stand) uses snippets of a letter written by John Muir to Theodore Roosevelt asking him to meet at Yosemite National Park. Muir pleads Roosevelt to "stand" with him in preserving this land. *Shema* (to listen) uses a poem by William Stafford who urges us to listen to what the earth is saying. *Mi Shebeirach* (a prayer for the sick) is the only English translation of the Hebrew prayer in the work. In the Jewish service, the *Mi Shebeirach* is often the emotional peak as it asks for the congregation to pray for those in need of healing. I view this movement as a call to action for us as inhabitants of the earth to do our part to heal it. Finally, *Kaddish* (a prayer for the dead) uses a very short line from the Bengali writer Rabindranath Tagore speaking about the sunset as a metaphor for remembering those who are no longer with us.

The title *Sacred Place* holds many meanings. Each writer that I have chosen views the earth as sacred. They speak of us as inhabitants, as visitors. Without the earth, there is no us. Another dimension is the experience that the listener has while hearing the piece live. It is not a coincidence that a piece framed in a Jewish service was premiered in a Lutheran church. I find it beautiful that the audience will be entering one sacred space with its own history and religious traditions and experiencing elements of another culture's service. There is a deep, unifying power in collective listening that transcends a single person or a single group's traditions. I am thinking about the concept of the "service" in the broadest sense: coming together to sit, listen, breathe, and understand. The audience is entering a sacred space within themselves, silently resonating with those around them.

TEXTS

I. Opening Prayer

In the dusk of the river, the wind
gone, the leaves grow still—
The beautiful poise of lightness,
The heavy world pushing toward it.

— Wendell Berry
Excerpt from “The Porch Over the River”

II. Amidah

“How softly these mountain rocks are adorned, and how fine and reassuring the company they keep—their brows in the sky, their feet set in groves and gay emerald meadows, a thousand flowers leaning confidingly against their adamant bosses, while birds bees butterflies help the river and waterfalls to stir all the air into music—things frail and fleeting and types of permanence meeting here and blending as if into this glorious mountain temple Nature had gathered her choicest treasures, whether great or small to draw her lovers into close confiding communion with her.”

— John Muir to Teddy Roosevelt
on preserving Yosemite National Park

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III. Shema

The earth says have a place, be what that place
requires; hear the sound the birds imply
and see as deep as ridges go behind
each other. (Some people call their scenery flat,
their only pictures framed by what they know:
I think around them rise a riches and a loss
too equal for their chart—but absolutely tall.)*

The earth says every summer have a ranch
that's minimum: one tree, one well, a landscape
that proclaims a universe—sermon
of the hills, hallelujah mountain,
highway guided by the way the world is tilted,
reduplication of mirage, flat evening:
a kind of ritual for the wavering.

The earth says where you live wear the kind
of color that your life is (grey shirt for me)*
and by listening with the same bowed head that sings
draw all things into one song, join
the sparrow on the lawn, and row that easy
way, the rage without met by the wings
within that guide you anywhere the wind blows.

Listening, I think that's what the earth says.

— William Stafford

V. Kaddish

“Let my thoughts come to you, when I am gone,
like the afterglow of sunset at the margin of starry silence.”

— Rabindranath Tagore, 1861–1941

VI. Closing Prayer

In the dusk of the river, the wind
gone, the leaves grow still—
The beautiful poise of lightness,
The heavy world pushing toward it.

— Wendell Berry
Excerpt from “The Porch Over the River”

IV. Mi Shebeirach

May the source of strength
Who blessed the ones before us
Help us find the courage
to make our lives a blessing
And let us say Amen

Bless those in need of healing
with *r'fuah sh'leimah*
The renewal of body,
the renewal of spirit
And let us say Amen

— Traditional Jewish Prayer

* Parenthetical portions of the original poem are not included in the musical setting.

Sacred Place

for SATB Chorus, Violin, Violoncello, and Piano

Alex Berko (ASCAP)

I. Opening Prayer

Wendell Berry

$\text{♩} = 56$, easy, in your own time

Violin

Violoncello

Soprano

Alto

Tenor

Bass

Piano

Solo mp

In the dusk of the riv-er, the wind gone, the leaves grow still The

$\text{♩} = 56$, easy, in your own time

4

T

beau-ti - ful poise of light - ness, The heav - y world push - ing toward

6

Vlc.

rit. *a tempo*

pp

T

it. The heav - y world push - ing toward it.

attacca

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IV. Mi Shebeirach

Traditional Jewish Prayer

$\text{♩} = 84, \text{passionate}$

f

S
May the source of strength _____ Who blessed the ones be - fore us _____

A
May the source of strength _____ Who blessed the ones be - fore us _____

T1
May the source of strength _____ Who blessed the ones be - fore us _____

T2
May the source of strength _____ Who blessed the ones be - fore us _____

B
May the source of strength _____ Who blessed the ones be - fore us _____

$\text{♩} = 84, \text{passionate}$

Pno.
for rehearsal only

4

S Help us find the cour - age to make our lives a

A Help us find the cour - age to make our lives a

T1 Help us find the cour - age to make our lives a

T2 Help us find the cour - age to make our lives a

B *unis.* Help us find the cour - age to make our lives a

Pno.

8

S bless - ing And let us say *unis.* A -

A bless - ing And let us say And let us say *unis.* A -

T1 bless - ing And let us, And let us say A -

T2 bless - ing And let us say A -

B bless - ing And let us say *unis.* A -

Pno.

9255

G ♩ = 92

67

Vln. *f*

Vlc. *f*

S1 *ff*
A - men!

S2 *ff*
A - men!

A1 *ff*
A - men!

A2 *ff*
A - men!

T1 *ff*
A - men!

T2 *ff*
A - men!

B *unis. ff*
A - men!

♩ = 92

Pno. *ff*

71

Vln.

Vlc.

S1

S2

A1

A2

T1

T2

B

Pno.

pp

p

p

p

p

p

p

p

(n)

(n)

Pedal release after 4 beats.
(Do not maintain under the
fermata with chorus)

V. Kaddish

Rabindranath Tagore

$\text{♩} = 60$, still, on the edge of silence *poco rit.* *a tempo*
molto sul tasto *molto sul tasto* *ppp* *p*

Vln. *molto sul tasto*

Vlc. *ppp*

Ten. Solo *Solo p*
 8 Let my thoughts come to you,

$\text{♩} = 60$, still, on the edge of silence *poco rit.* *a tempo*

Pno. *ppp*

8va-----

7 *molto rit.* *a tempo* **A**

Vln. *ppp* *ppp* *p* *ppp*

Vlc. *ppp* *p* *ppp*

Alto Solo *Solo p*
 Let my thoughts come to you, when I am gone, *p* Let my thoughts

Ten. Solo *mp* *mp*
 Let my thoughts come to you, when I am gone, Let my thoughts

Bass Solo *Solo p*
 Let my thoughts

Pno. *molto rit.* *a tempo*

(8va)-----

Text: Rabindranath Tagore (1861–1941) (PD).

13

rit. a tempo rit. a tempo

Vln.

Vlc.

Alto Solo

Ten. Solo

Bass Solo

come to you, when I am gone, like the af - ter - glow of sun - set

come to you, when I am gone, like the af - ter - glow of sun - set of

come to you, when I am gone, like the af - ter - glow of sun - set

rit. a tempo rit. a tempo

Pno.

(8^{va})

18

(molto sul tasto)

B **Meno mosso** (♩ = 56) *molto rit.*

begin gradual change to "ord."

ppp cresc. poco a poco

(molto sul tasto)

ppp cresc. poco a poco

begin gradual change to "ord."

sun - set

sun - set

sun - set

sun - set

Meno mosso (♩ = 56) *molto rit.*

p

loco

(8^{va})

9255

Più mosso (♩ = 60)

25 *ord.*

Vln. *(p)*

Vlc. *ord.* *(p)*

Alto *Tutti mf*

A Let _____ my thoughts come to you, when I am gone, like _____ the af - ter -

T *Tutti mp*

B Let my thoughts come to you, when I am gone, like the af - ter -

Più mosso (♩ = 60)

Pno. *(8va)*

31

Vln. *(mp)*

Vlc. *mf*

S *ppp* (inside Violin) *mm* *unis.* Let my

A glow of sun - set _____ of sun - set _____ Let my

T glow of sun - set _____ of sun - set _____

B

Pno. *(8va)*

57 E

Vln. *f* *pp*

Vlc. *ff*

S *Solo p*
star - ry si - lence. of star - ry si - lence, of

A
ry si - lence.

T1
8

T2
8
star - ry

B
8
star - ry

Pno. *pp*
(8^{va}) 8^{va}

63 (Solo) *poco rit.*

S
star - ry si - lence, star - ry si - lence.

Pno. *poco rit.*
(8^{va})