

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 adamantine 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

First and Last Stanzas of “The Porch Over the River” from *New Collected Poems* copyright © 2012 by Wendell Berry, from *New Collected Poems*. Reprinted by permission of Counterpoint Press.

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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

♩ = 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

♩ = 56, easy, in your own time

T

8

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

Vlc.

6

rit. *a tempo*

pp

T

8

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

attacca

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II. Amidah

John Muir

9 $\text{♩} = 92$, moving forward *poco rit.* *a tempo*

Vln. *pp* *mp* *pp*

Vlc.

Pno. *p* *mp* *p* *mp*
pedal freely with chord changes

15 *molto rit.* *a tempo* *con moto* *molto rit.*

Vln. *pp* *mp*

Vlc. *pp* *mp*

S
A
T
B
p *p*
How soft - ly,
soft - ly,

Pno. *p* *pp* *mp*

(rit.) *a tempo*

20

Vln. *pp* *pp*

Vlc. *pp* *p*

S
A
T
B

How soft - ly these moun - tain rocks are a-dorned,
soft - ly these moun - tain rocks

Pno. *p* *p*

24 *poco rit.* *a tempo*

Vln. *mp* *pp*

Vlc. *mf espr.* *pp*

S
A
T
B

and how
and how fine and re - as - sur - ing the com - pa - ny they —

Pno. *mp* *p*

28 *accel. poco a poco*

Vln. *mp* *pizz.* *pp*

Vlc. *mp*

S *mp*
com - pa - ny they keep

A *p* *mp*
com - pa - ny they keep, com - pa - ny they

T *p*
keep,

Pno. *p* *mp* *p* *mp*

accel. poco a poco

31 *(accel.)* [A] ♩ = 100, *blooming*

Vln. *f* *p*

Vlc. *f* *arco* *p*

S *cresc.* *f* *mp*
their brows in the sky, their

A *cresc.* *f* *mp*
keep their brows in the sky, their

T *mp* *cresc.* *f* *mp*
+B com - pa - ny they keep their brows in the sky, their

Pno. *p* *f* *p* *mf*

(accel.) ♩ = 100, *blooming*

35

Vln. *f* *pp*

Vlc. *f*

S *unis.* *f* *mp* *pp*
 feet set in groves and gay em - erald mead - ows, a

A *f* *pp*
 feet set in groves a

T B *f*
 feet set in groves

Pno. *p cresc.* *f*
ped. *

38

Vln. *pp* *mp* *pp* (*pp*)

Vlc. *pp* *mp* *pp* (*pp*)

S *p*
 thou sand a - gainst

A *p*
 thou sand a - gainst

T *Tenor mp*
 a thou-sand flow-ers lean-ing con-fid-ing-ly a - gainst their ad - a - man - tine boss -

Pno. *p*

pedal freely with chord changes

41 **B**

Vln. *mp* *p* *mf*

Vlc. *mp* *pp* *p* *mf*

S *mp*
while birds and bees and but-ter-flies,

A *mp*
while

T *mp*
es, while birds and bees and but-ter-flies, while

B

Pno. *p* *mp* *p*

III. Shema

William Stafford

$\text{♩} = 30, \textit{molto accel.}$ $\text{♩} = 76$

Pno. *pp* *p*

Ad.

S 4 *poco rit.* *a tempo*
Sop. Solo *mp delicato*
The earth says

Pno. *poco rit.* *a tempo*

Ad.

S 6
have a place, be what that place re -

Pno.

Ad.

S 9
quires; hear the sound the birds im-ply and

Pno.

Ad.

Text: "In Response to a Question: 'What Does the Earth Say?'" from *The Way It Is: New & Selected Poems*.

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12 *mf* 5 3

S see _____ as deep as ridg - es go be - hind _____ each oth - er. _____

Pno.

(*Rec.*)

14 *poco accel.* *poco rit.*

Vln. *pp* *mf*

S *pp*

Pno. *poco accel.* *poco rit.* *cresc.* *mf*

(*Rec.*)

17 *gradually gaining back tempo*

Vln. *pp* *cresc. poco a poco*

T Tenor Solo *p espr.*
The

Pno. *pp* *gradually gaining back tempo*

(*Rec.*)

19 **A**

$\text{♩} = 80$, more than before

Vln. *(cresc.)* *mp dim. poco a poco*

T
8 earth says eve-ry sum-mer have a

Pno. *p*

22

Vln. *(dim.)*

T
8 ranch that's min-i-mum: one

Pno.

25

Vln. *pp* *cresc. poco a poco*

Vlc. *p*

T
8 tree, one well, a land - scape

Pno. *cresc. poco a poco*

28 **B** *allarg.*

Vln. *(cresc.)*

Vlc. *mf* *p* *mf*

T 8 that pro - claims a *allarg.*

Pno. *(cresc.)* *allarg.*

31 *a tempo* *allarg.*

Vln. *mf* *p*

Vlc. *mf* *p*

T 8 *f* *p* u - ni - verse *allarg.*

Pno. *a tempo* *f* *p* *allarg.*

30

C

a tempo

34

Vln. *f espr.*

Vlc. *f espr.*

S
A *f*
ser-mon of the hills, hal - le - lu - jah moun-tain, high-way guid-ed by the way the

T
B *f*
ser-mon of the hills, hal - le - lu - jah moun-tain, high-way guid-ed by the way the

Pno. *a tempo*
f espr.
And. simile

37

Vln. *dim. poco a poco*

Vlc. *pp* *f espr.*

S
A *p*
world is tilt-ed,

T
B *p* *f espr.*
world is tilt-ed, re - du - pli - ca - tion of mi - rage, flat

Pno. *mp*

IV. Mi Shebeirach

Traditional Jewish Prayer

$\text{♩} = 84, \textit{passionate}$

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 _____

$\text{♩} = 84, \textit{passionate}$

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

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.

A ♩ = 80, *opening up towards the heavens*

12

Vln. *p* *f* *p*

Vlc. *fp* *f* *p* *f*

S men! *ff*

A men! *ff*

T1 men! *ff*

T2 men! *ff*

B men! *ff*

♩ = 80, *opening up towards the heavens*

Pno. *ff* with *rubato*

VI

VI

The musical score consists of eight staves. The top two staves are for Violin (Vln.) and Viola (Vlc.), both in D major and 4/4 time. The Vln. part starts with a piano (*p*) dynamic and includes fingerings II and III. The Vlc. part starts with *fp* and includes accents. The vocal staves (Soprano, Alto, Tenor 1, Tenor 2, Bass) all have the lyrics "men!" and a fortissimo (*ff*) dynamic. The piano part features a *ff* dynamic with *rubato* and includes triplets and accents. The score includes various time signatures (3/4, 4/4) and dynamic markings.

16

Vln. *f* *p*

Vlc. *fp* *f* *p*

S1 *f* May —

S2 *f* May —

A *f* May —

T1

T2

B

Pno.

VI

VI

The musical score is for a full orchestra and vocal soloists. It features a complex rhythmic structure with time signatures of 4/4, 3/4, and 2/4. The woodwinds (S1, S2, A, T1, T2, B) have rests for most of the piece, with vocal soloists S1 and S2 singing the word "May" at the end. The piano part includes triplets and slurs. A large watermark "Copying is illegal" is overlaid on the score.

V. Kaddish

Rabindranath Tagore

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

Vln. *molto sul tasto*

Vlc. *ppp*

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

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

Pno. *ppp*

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

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

Vlc. *ppp* *ppp* *p* *ppp*

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

molto rit. *a tempo*
 Let my thoughts

Pno. *ppp* *ppp* *p* *ppp*

(8^{va})

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

9255

13 *rit.* *a tempo* *rit.* *a tempo*

Vln.

Vlc.

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

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

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

Pno.

(8^{va})

18 *(molto sul tasto)* **B** *Meno mosso* (♩ = 56) *molto rit.*
begin gradual change to "ord."

Vln. *ppp cresc. poco a poco* *(molto sul tasto)* *begin gradual change to "ord."*

Vlc. *ppp cresc. poco a poco*

Alto Solo
sun - set

Ten. Solo
sun - set

Bass Solo
sun - set

Pno. *Meno mosso* (♩ = 56) *molto rit.*
p loco

(8^{va})

Più mosso (♩ = 60)

25

Vln. *ord.*
(*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 -

Pno. *Più mosso (♩ = 60)*

(8^{va})

31

Vln. (*mp*)

Vlc. *mf*

S *ppp (inside Violin)*
mm _____ Let my

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

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

Pno.

(8^{va})

VI. Closing Prayer

Wendell Berry

$\text{♩} = 56$, like before, but with renewed spirit
con sord.

Vln. *pp*

Vlc.

Ten. Solo *Solo mp*

In the dusk of the riv-er, the wind gone, — the

5

Vln. *con sord.*

Vlc. *pp*

Ten. Solo

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

8

Vln.

Vlc.

Ten. Solo

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

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