

Program Notes and Texts

Introduction

Songs are both personal and they are collective. They “belong” to the composers and poets who wrote their original music and texts. They “belong” to individuals (and couples!) who have one about which they can say, “They’re playing our song.” And then songs belong to everyone. This aspect of collective ownership is part of their huge emotional and intellectual appeal.

In his article about these concerts in the current newsletter of the Chamber Chorale, Paul Rusterholz evokes some of his personal connections with today’s sixteen songs. He writes about Halsey Stevens, the much-loved teacher at his graduate school alma mater, the University of Southern California, who composed the music for *Go, Lovely Rose*. He recalls the first time he walked into the intimate yet expansive space of the royal chapel in Paris “whose walls appeared to be made entirely out of stained glass” – the *Sainte Chapelle* which is the source and subject of Eric Whitacre’s song of the same name. He remembers when he “first encountered Bach’s *Komm, Jesu, Komm* in 1974.” And he adds, “I’m thrilled to be conducting it once again.” He salutes his long-time collaborators, Mary Beth Hensel and Dean Whiteway. And he predicts that you, the audience, will have the tune for the Swingle Singers’ *Saints Fugue*, an arrangement of *When the Saints Go Marching In*, “in your head for at least a week.”

But really, because of the personal nature of songs, some of these have been “in our heads” for as long as we can remember. I grew up with my father singing a lot of songs and hymns around the house, on car trips, and with his old college buddies who would often visit us. Among these were *Tenting On The Old Camp Ground* and *A Mighty Fortress*. I’m sure that Paul’s parents did too. And I hope your families did also.

***Sing Me A Song* by Orazio Vecchi**

Sing me a song with not a note of sadness!
When all the pain of love drives me to madness:
Sing me to sleep with a sweet serenading,
Oh, so gently, oh so gently from sound to silence fading.

Sing me a song to cool a lover's burning!
When to my heart the anguish keeps returning:
*Sing me to sleep with a sweet serenading,
Oh, so gently, oh so gently from sound to silence fading.*

It was no doubt on the hit parade in circa 1580 – or whenever it was that Orazio Vecchi first started singing this song, which already gives what it asks for. The singer wants a song as a handy cure for the perpetual pains and anguish of love. Look! He (or she) is already singing it! It's literally "short and sweet." But it follows the rhythm of almost every day: it first wakes you up, and then it puts you to sleep. This happens twice in the brief existence of the song, as the verses are mini-reveilles, while the refrain is a mini-lullaby. Go figure! Go enjoy!

***Mignonne Allon Voir si la Roze* by Guillaume Costeley**

*Mignonne allon voir si la Roze
Qui ce matin avoit desclose,
Sa robe de pourpre au soleil,
Ha point perdu ceste vesprée
Les plis de sa robe pourrée
Et son teint au votre pareil.*

Mignonne, let us go see if the rose
which this morning had revealed
its crimson robe to the sun
has not lost, this evening
the folds of its crimson robe
and its complexion like unto yours.

*Las! Las voyez comme
en peu d'espace
Mignonne elle a dessus la place,
Las! ses beautez laissé choir.
O vraiment maratre nature,
Puis q'une telle fleur ne dure
Que du matin jusques au soir.*

Alas! See how,
in a short time,
Mignonne, it has let its beauties
fall to the ground.
O, nature is truly a stepmother,
Since such a flower lasts
only from morning to evening.

*Doncques si me croyez, Mignonne,
Tandis que votre age fleuronne
En sa plus verte nouveauté
Cueillez, cueillez votre jeunesse,
Comme a ceste fleur la veillesse
Fera ternir votre beauté.*

Therefore, if you believe me, Mignonne,
while you are in the flower of youth
in all its fresh greenery,
Pluck your youth,
for as with this flower,
age will cause your beauty to fade.

– Poem by Pierre de Ronsard (1524-1585)
– Translation by Barbara Lomas Rusterholz

The first word of this song is both a common adjective and a proper

noun. It's like "Belle" in *Beauty and the Beast* – and of course like the word "Rose" itself, or herself! "Mignonne" means both someone who is "lovely and dear" and it means "My Lovely Dear." We English know the word best in its masculine form when it's used to describe the "lovely" piece of meat called "filet mignon."

If we had world enough and time, we could analyze other words and metaphors of this song – such as its calling Nature not "Mother" but "Stepmother"! And I think that's exactly what clever, eloquent Ronsard wants to happen with his *Mignonne*. He wants her to get so caught up in his language that she doesn't see the amorous trap he's setting. The song begins so sweetly, so innocently, saying, "Let's take a walk in the rose garden this evening..." Then comes some flattery, which may get the poet ... where he wants to go. Then some philosophical nature-watching. And then the come-on: "Right now, when you're at the peak of your beauty, allow me to pick it (while pretending it's you that are doing the picking!)"

The central theme is a classic one – much older than Ronsard and Costeley. And then it's as young as springtime, as young as the words of a hit song of my youth: "The time is right, your perfume fills my head, the stars get red and oh the night's so blue – and then I go and spoil it all by saying something stupid like 'I love you.'" But Ronsard is not as foolish as Frank Sinatra.

***Go, Lovely Rose* by Halsey Stevens**

Go, lovely Rose,
Tell her that wastes her time and me,
That now she knows,
When I resemble her to thee,
How sweet and fair she seems to be.

Tell her that's young,
And shuns to have her graces spied,
That hadst thou sprung
In deserts where no men abide,
Thou must have uncommended died.

Small is the worth
Of beauty from the light retired:
Bid her come forth,

Suffer herself to be desired,
And not blush so to be admired.

Then die—that she
The common fate of all things rare
May read in thee;
How small a part of time they share
That are so wondrous sweet and fair!

— poem by Edmund Waller, 1606-1687

Here we have the same “theme” taken up by an English poet a century after Ronsard, but with variations and a twist. The twist here is the creation of a talking Rose. And not only a talking Rose, but one that can move around as well and then suffer a dramatic death on command in order to make the message all so clear. The message and the messenger are the same: “Life is short but love is long.” The hope is the same: that flattery *will* get you everywhere – note the repeated compliment naming the unnamed beauty “sweet and fair.”

As always, read the words – perhaps more than once. Halsey Stevens’ beautiful setting was composed in August 1942 in relatively nearby Iowa City. It’s dedicated to “Harriet.” (It would take a little bit more research to discover “Who is Harriet? What is She?”)

***Komm, Jesu, Komm* by Johann Sebastian Bach**

*Komm, Jesu, komm,
mein Leib ist müde,
die Kraft verschwindt
je mehr und mehr,
ich sehne mich nach deinem Friede;
der saure Weg wird mir zu schwer!
Komm, komm,
ich will mich dir ergeben,
Du bist der rechte Weg,
die Wahrheit und das Leben.*

Come, Jesus, come,
my flesh is weary,
my strength
is fading fast;
I long for thy peace;
the bitter path is too hard for me!
Come, come,
I will give myself to thee.
You are the true way,
the truth, and the life.

Chorale

*Drum schliess ich mich in deine Hände
und sage, Welt, zu guter Nacht!
Eilt gleich mein Lebenslauf*

So I give myself into thy hands
and say good night to you, o world!
Though the course of my life

<p>zu Ende, ist doch der Geist wohl angebracht. Er soll bei seinem Schöpfer schweben, weil Jesus ist und bleibt der wahre Weg zum Leben.</p>	<p>hastens to its end, the spirit is truly ready. Let it dwell with its creator, since Jesus is and remains the true way to life.</p>
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Where do composers go for the texts that they want to both transform into something temporal – that lives and moves – *and* set in a form that they hope will be more than temporal, that will have a long life? Answer: They go to the words of poets, both secular and sacred. And they choose and select, read and “edit.”

For this religious love song to Jesus, Bach went to a huge collection of some 5,000 hymns which had been published in 1697. And there he found an eleven-stanza devotional poem that Paul Thymich, one of his predecessors as the cantor for the church of St. Thomas in Leipzig, had written for the funeral of a rector of the church school. Bach chose the first and the last stanza to use for this motet which dates from his early years in Leipzig. It was most likely also composed for a specific funeral. The Biblical source for both stanzas is John 14:6 where Jesus declares, “I am the way, and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father but by me.”

But pause (“stop, look and listen!”) to what Bach does with the words. When simply spoken, they go by too fast. Bach expands them. He savors them. Note especially how, at the end of the final section of the first verse, he takes off, as it were, on the single word *Leben* (“life”) and embellishes it. As Albert Schweitzer wrote about Bach, “He preaches sermons in music.”

And Bach did more. He wrote religious love songs – songs full of emotion and pathos, of hope and fear, of realism and of faith. I’m sure I’m not the only one here who recognizes the connection between the motet’s *Welt, zu guter Nacht* (“Good night to you, world”), and the deeply moving conclusion to his *St. Matthew Passion* where the chorus keeps repeating, *Mein Jesu, gute Nacht!* – “Good night, my Jesus.”

Viriditas by Joan Szymko

I am the one whose praise
 echoes on high.
 I adorn all the earth.
I am the breeze that nurtures all things
 green.
I encourage blossoms to flourish
 with ripening fruits.
I am led by the spirit to feed
 the purest streams.
 I am the rain
 coming from the dew
that causes the grasses to laugh
 with the joy of life.
 I call forth tears.
I am the yearning for good

– *Hildegard of Bingen (1098-1179)*
– *translated by Gabriele Uhlein*

Joan Szymko, a choral conductor and composer from the Pacific Northwest, founded a women's vocal ensemble which was named after this piece, the first she composed for them, *Viriditas*. The program notes she wrote for it contain the following information:

Hildegard of Bingen (1099-1179) was a Benedictine abbess and composer, theologian, painter, poet, philosopher, naturalist, herbalist – and advisor to popes and emperors. The goodness of creation is at the center of her works. She coined the theological usage of viriditas, or 'greening power' to express the creative force inherent in all life.

I imagined that the words I have set here were received by Hildegard in one of her visions. Its opening measures sound as the perpetual, pulsing praise of the Creator by creation. The 'I' here is the voice of viriditas – of 'greening.' Hildegard believed that this greening moistens and cracks open the most hardened of hearts. It calls forth compassion – 'the yearning for good.' The tone throughout this piece is to be joyful, ecstatic, and filled with awe at the wonder of creation.

***Sainte-Chapelle* by Eric Whitacre**

<i>Castissima virgo Advenit in capellam; Et angeli in vitro Molliter cantaverunt,</i>	An innocent girl Entered the chapel And the angels in the glass Softly sang,
<i>“Hosanna in excelsis!”</i>	“Hosanna in the highest!”
<i>Illa castissima Susurravit, “Sanctus! Sanctus! Sanctus!”</i>	The innocent girl Whispered, “Holy! Holy! Holy!”
<i>Lux implevit spatium, Multiformis colore; Et audivit vocem suam Resonare,</i>	Light filled the chamber, Many-colored light; She heard her voice Echo,
<i>“Sanctus! Sanctus! Sanctus!”</i>	“Holy! Holy! Holy!”
<i>Molliter angeli cantaverunt,</i>	Softly the angels sang
<i>“Dominus Deus sabaoth, Pleni sunt coeli et terra Gloria tua!” “Hosanna in excelsis! Hosanna in excelsis!”</i>	“Lord God of Hosts, Heaven and earth are full Of your glory!” “Hosannah in the highest! Hosannah in the highest!”
<i>Vox in lumine transformat, Et lumen canit,</i>	Her voice became light, And the light sang,
<i>“Sanctus! Sanctus! Sanctus!”</i>	“Holy! Holy! Holy!”
<i>Lumen canit molliter,</i>	The light sang softly,
<i>“Dominus Deus sabaoth, Pleni sunt coeli et terra Gloria tua!”</i>	“Lord God of Hosts, Heaven and earth are full Of your glory!”
<i>Castissima virgo Advenit in capellam; Et angeli in vitro Molliter cantaverunt.</i>	An innocent girl Entered the chapel And the angels in the glass Softly sang.

– Latin poem by Charles Anthony Silvestri

It's in the medieval heart of Paris, on the *Île de la Cité*, in the center of the royal castle close (until the king moved to the "newer, bigger" Louvre). It is a "Gothic Jewel" built between 1239 and 1248 by King Louis IX (the "Saint Louis" whose name lives down to our day). It is *La Sainte Chapelle*, "The Holy Chapel." Its original purpose was to house the relics that the king had purchased from Constantinople via Venice. These included the Crown of Thorns and the Lance which pierced Christ's side.

The subject of Charles Silvestri's Latin poem does not concern the relics per se. But the subject is holiness, and how a place, a structure, evokes the sense of holiness. Silvestri imagines a young ("most chaste") girl entering into *La Sainte Chapelle* where she mystically hears the angels in the stained glass sing the words they sang at Christ's birth: "Hosanna in excelsis." The girl responds with a Bible verse of her own, the "Holy, Holy, Holy" of Isaiah 6:3. In the sanctuary, her voice echoes. The angels take up the refrain and complete the verse from Isaiah: "Lord God of hosts, heaven and earth are full of your glory."

Then comes a strong, memorable image: the multicolored light from the stained glass windows begins to sing itself: *Et lumen canit*. And if we ask, "What kind of music did the light sing?", we have Paul Rusterholz's words: "Whitacre creates music of holiness, combining ancient, chant-like melody with modern dissonances."

Et lumen canit.

***Saints Fugue* by Ward Swingle**

Oh when the Saints go marching in,
Oh when the Saints go marching in,
Lord, I want to be in that number
When the Saints go marching in.

Oh when they gather round the throne ...

Oh when the sun refuse' to shine ...

Oh when the stars have disappeared ...

Oh when they crown him Lord of all ...

Oh when the Day of Judgment comes ...

It's thanks to my older sisters, Jo and Liz (who got the first record player in our family in the early 1960s), that I heard the Swingle Singers' first LP, popularly known as "Bach's Greatest Hits." But it's thanks to the Internet that I now know that the album stayed on the charts for 18 weeks in 1964, though it never reached any higher than the 13th best-selling record. I also remember hearing them on AM radio, way back when it was very rare for pop stations to play anything resembling classical music. (I'm sure some other people here will remember this as well.)

So the group has been around for a long, long time. They started in Paris and since 1973 have been in London. Bravo to them for their long career and the many ways they've helped make classical musical popular.

Their version of "When the Saints Go Marching In" really needs no notes, except to share what's on the sheet music: Ward Swingle arranged it in 1986 for the Finnish choir "The Chamberlains." It is dedicated to the choir's conductor, Dr. Heikki Peltola. And then to repeat what Paul Rusterholz says about it: "It has been a demanding and delightful challenge for the singers."

A Mighty Fortress by Martin Luther

Audience:

A mighty Fortress is our God,
A Bulwark never failing;
Our Helper He amid the flood
Of mortal ills prevailing:
For still our ancient foe
Doth seek to work us woe;
His craft and power are great,
And, armed with cruel hate,
On earth is not his equal.

Chorale:

Did we in our own strength confide,
Our striving would be losing;
Were not the right Man on our side,
The Man of God's own choosing.
Dost ask who that may be?
Christ Jesus, it is He;
Lord Sabaoth His Name,

From age to age the same,
And He must win the battle.

Chorale:

And though this world, with devils filled,
Should threaten to undo us,
We will not fear, for God hath willed
His truth to triumph through us.
The prince of darkness grim,
We tremble not for him;
His rage we can endure,
For lo! his doom is sure,
One little word shall fell him.

Audience:

That word above all earthly powers,
No thanks to them, abideth;
The Spirit and the gifts are ours
Through Him who with us sideth;
Let goods and kindred go,
This mortal life also;
The body they may kill,
God's truth abideth still,
His Kingdom is forever.

Less than a week ago we celebrated the 500th anniversary of “Reformation Day” – that October 31, 1517 when Professor/Brother Martin Luther nailed his *95 Theses* to the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg. And in just a few days, we’ll observe Luther’s 534th birthday on November 11. Simple math tells us that on the eve of the Reformation, he was just about to turn 34. The next twenty-nine years, until his death in 1546, would be quite eventful.

Luther didn’t “get everything right.” He never overcame his prejudices against the peasants and against the Jews, to give two very prominent examples. But we have lived to the day, thank God, when there is much more agreement than disagreement between Protestants and Catholics as pertains to doctrine.

But Luther got music right. He knew its power. He knew how it is both human and holy. Read these words taken from a preface he wrote for

an early collection of hymns. They will help us all, especially those in the audience/congregation, sing the first and last stanza of this great hymn, the “marching song” of the Reformation. (But remember, “No dancing in the aisles!”)

Music is to be praised as second only to the Word of God because by it all the emotions are swayed. Nothing on earth is stronger in order to make the sad happy and the happy sad, to encourage the downcast, mellow the proud, temper the exuberant, or pacify the vengeful... The Church Fathers desired that music should always abide in the church. That is why there are so many songs and psalms. This precious gift has been bestowed on humans alone to remind them that they are created to praise and magnify the Lord. But when natural music is polished by art, then one begins to see with amazement the great and perfect wisdom of God in his wonderful work of music. This happens when one voice takes a simple part and around it sing three, four, or five other voices, leaping, springing round about, marvelously gracing the simple part, like a square dance in heaven with friendly bows, embracing, and hearty swinging of partners. The person who does not find this an inexpressible miracle of the Lord is truly a clod and is not worthy to be considered a human being.

Four Pastorales by Cecil Effinger

No Mark

Corn grew where the corn was spilled
In the wreck where Casey Jones was killed,
Scrub-oak grows and sassafras
Around the shady stone you pass
To show where Stonewall Jackson fell
That Saturday at Chancellorsville,
And soapweed bayonets are steeled
Across the Custer battlefield.

But where you die the sky is black
A little while with cracking flak,
Then ocean closes very still
Above your skull that held our will.

O swing away, white gull, white gull.
Evening star, be beautiful.

Noon

Noon is half the passion of light,
Noon is the middle prairie and the slumber,
The lull of resin weed, the yucca languor.
The wilt of sage at noon is the longest distance any nostril knows.
How far have we come to feel the shade of this tree?

Basket

The children out of the shade have brought me a basket
Very small and woven of dry grass
Smelling as sweet in December as the day
I smelled it first.

Only one other ever
Was this to me, sweet birch from a far river,
You would not know, you did not smell the birch,
You would not know, you did not smell the grass,
You did not know me then.

Wood

There was a dark and awful wood
Where increments of death accrued
To every leaf and antlered head
Until it withered and was dead,
And lonely there I wandered
And wandered and wandered.

But once a myth-white moon shone there
And you were kneeling by a flower,
And it was practical and wise
For me to kneel and you to rise,
And me to rise and turn to go,
And you to turn and whisper no,
And seven wondrous stags that I
Could not believe walked slowly by.

– *poems by Thomas Hornsby Ferril (1896-1988)*

The first and last are sonnets – 14-line poems with divisions and rhyme schemes that can vary. These two are written in rhymed couplets, but with rhymes that are often so delicate that they escape notice. They are,

to speak like a literary critic, very well crafted poems. The sonnets, as well as the shorter lyrics written in free verse, lend themselves naturally to musical settings. They are all evocative, nostalgic, poignant, emotional – yet in subdued, oboe-like tones. They are really all love songs.

No Mark sings of three memorable landscapes in American history: the site of Casey Jones's train wreck; the location where General "Stonewall" Jackson was killed by the "friendly fire" of a Confederate sniper; and the very famous battlefield of Custer's Little Big Horn. The sonnet concludes by evoking a place that can't be found – where a fighter airplane is shot down by "cracking flak" over an ocean. The pilot who thus dies is clearly related to the poet, either by blood or by nationality, for Ferril speaks to him directly saying, "Your skull that held our will."

Noon and *Basket* are both in the present tense. The poet seems lost in thought, only to become aware that he's with his beloved. The nature around him – the sunlight and the smells of prairie grass, resin weed, yucca, sage and birch tree – prompts him to speak directly to "her." These lines are the strongest, most emotional of the poems: "How far have we come to feel the shade of this tree" and "You did not know me then."

Wood describes a mythical landscape, something that Tolkien or C. S. Lewis might have imagined (though its very first line alludes to the opening words of Dante's *Inferno*). This sonnet calls out for analysis, for we want to ask it several questions: Do the "increments of death" refer to the four seasons? Or is there a rack of antlers caught among tree branches, the only remaining vestige of a deer? Is the meeting of the two lovers in the second half of the poem going to be a happy or a sad one? Are they going to stay together after the "wondrous" appearance of those seven stags? (And why seven?)

***Pokpok Alimpako* by Francisco F. Feliciano**

<i>Pokpok alimpako pok!</i>	Pound your hands;
<i>Limpakopiko malalago isi daling</i>	Dali will run.
<i>daon si Boroboro</i>	Boro-boro is not around.
<i>bukas kasa-isa</i>	Open that hand under the other.
<i>Pokpok alimpako!</i>	Pound your hands!

This is a children's song from a children's game – and they will laugh at the end, for everyone wins! It's a Maranao (in the southern Philippines)

equivalent of the children's games of our youth – like “Paddy Cake, Paddy Cake” and “One Potato, Two Potato.” A circle is formed; the kids “put in their dukes,” that is, their fists, and alternately pound away on them until, starting from the bottom, the fists are opened, palms up, and it all starts over again. At some point, it concludes with the hands staying open so the kids can ruffle one another's hair. But the Filipino choir that one can see on YouTube can't play the game and sing the song at the same time. It's too hard: only kids can do that.

It's thanks to the well-known Filipino composer Francisco Feliciano observing children playing in the marketplace, and then to his being able to transcribe their chant (to which he's added another Maranao melody), that we have this work. Dr. Feliciano has created more than thirty major works that include operas, oratorios and masses, along with hundreds of hymns and other liturgical works. In 1981, *Pokpok Alimpako* was featured as the contest piece of a national musical festival for young artists in the Philippines. The evil spirits Dali and Boro-boro have stayed away ever since!

***Seeing Nellie Home* by J. Fletcher, arranged by Alice Parker and Robert Shaw**

In the sky the bright stars glitter'd,
On the bank the pale moon shone;
And 'twas from Aunt Dinah's quilting party
I was seeing Nellie home.

*Chorus: I was seeing Nellie home,
I was seeing Nellie home,
And 'twas from Aunt Dinah's quilting party
I was seeing Nellie home.*

On my arm a soft hand rested,
Rested light as ocean foam;
And 'twas from Aunt Dinah's quilting party
I was seeing Nellie home. *Chorus*

On my lips a whisper trembl'd,
Trembl'd till it dared to come,
And 'twas from Aunt Dinah's quilting party
I was seeing Nellie home. *Chorus*

On my life new hopes were dawning
And those hopes have lived and grown,
And 'twas from Aunt Dinah's quilting party
I was seeing Nellie home. *Chorus*

I somehow missed this classic when I was growing up, even though it was one that seniors at my father's college would sing when they'd gather on the long evenings of "the old days" when there was a full three weeks between their last exams and graduation. Who knows its age?

When Johnny Cash introduces it on a TV show in the early '70s, he says, "Here's a song for you older people..." But at the same time, it is always young. Its optimistic energy is infectious. It's about the dawning of new hopes. And as the words themselves tell us, the singer and his Nellie lived happily ever after ... they got home from Aunt Dinah's quilting party!

***Tenting On The Old Camp Ground* by Walter Kittredge, arranged by Dale Warland, guitar part edited by Jeffrey Van**

We are tenting tonight on the old camp ground,
Give us a song to cheer
Our weary hearts, a song of home,
And friends we love so dear.

*Refrain: Many are the hearts that are weary tonight,
Wishing for the war to cease;
Many are the hearts looking for the right
To see the dawn of peace.
Tenting tonight, tenting tonight, tenting on the old camp ground.*

We've been tenting tonight on the old camp ground
Thinking of days gone by,
Of the loved ones at home that gave us the hand,
And the tear that said "Good-bye!"

We are weary of war on the old camp ground,
Many dead and gone,
Of the brave and true who've left their homes,
Others been wounded long.

Refrain

The mood is the same as the haunting fiddle tune – *Ashokan Farewell* – that Ken Burns used to such effect throughout his Civil War documentary. It is one of pride and sadness.

The soldiers, on both sides, continue to do their duty. But they honestly express their feelings. They are tired; they are worn; they are overcome with emotion as they think of the immense loss of human life that has already happened. And there is more to come.

We don't need statistics about Civil War casualties. We don't really need to know anything about the musician who wrote the song, except that Walter Kittridge composed it the night in 1863 when he couldn't sleep after being rejected (due to poor health) to serve in the Northern Army. It's interesting, but not necessary to know, that Charles Ives "quotes" *Tenting Tonight* in his song *They Are There*.

What we do need to do is renew our appreciation for the power of music – of how one song can sum up a whole war. And we need to thank Dale Warland and Jeffrey Van for giving this famous old song a new form – a new life, as it were.

***Let Me Fly* arranged and adapted by Robert DeCormier**

'Way down yonder in the middle of the fiel',
Angel a-workin' at the chariot wheel.
Not so partic'lar 'bout workin' at the wheel,
I jus' wan' to see how the chariot feel.

*Refrain: Oh let me fly, oh let me fly
Oh let me fly to Mount Zion,
Lord, Lord ...*

Meet the hypocrite on the street.
First thing he do is show his teeth.
Next thing he do is tell a lie.
Well, the best thing to do is pass him by. *Refrain*

I got a mother in the Promised Land.
Well, I ain't gonna stop 'til I shake her hand.
Not so partic'lar 'bout shakin' her hand,
But I just wan' to get to the Promised Land. *Refrain*

I heard such a-rumbalin' in the sky,
I thought my Lord was passin' by.
'Twas the good ol' chariot drawin' nigh.
Well, it shook the earth, swept the sky. *Refrain*

I want wings, I wan' to fly,
Oh Lord, I wan' to fly
Oh won't you let me fly
to Mount Zion, Lord, Lord? *Refrain*

The chariot is, of course, “the chariot of fire” that carried Elijah to heaven on his ascension day. But look where it is first. It’s “down yonder in the middle of the field” where it has broken down like a farm wagon. Mount Zion is the holiest place in the Holy Lands. It’s pretty close to being heaven on earth. And the “I” of the spiritual wants to get there so badly he sings about it after every verse.

Spirituals remain amazing by what they do in a seemingly effortless way: they join heaven and earth, the holy and the human. Only in a spiritual could you have the sweet chariot of Elijah in need of repairs (and note that it does get fixed by the last verse). And only in a spiritual would you have the juxtaposition of Mount Zion with “the hypocrite on the street.”

The song ends with a question that is also a prayer: “Oh won't you let me fly to Mount Zion, Lord?” The answer is of course, “Yes!” and “Amen!”

Program Notes by Donald H. Fox whose biography of his father, *The Old Familiar Places, the Life and Letters of Frederic E. Fox, the Spirit of Princeton* starts with (part of) the title of his parents' “song” – the classic one from the early 1940s, “I'll Be Seeing You in all the Old Familiar Places.”